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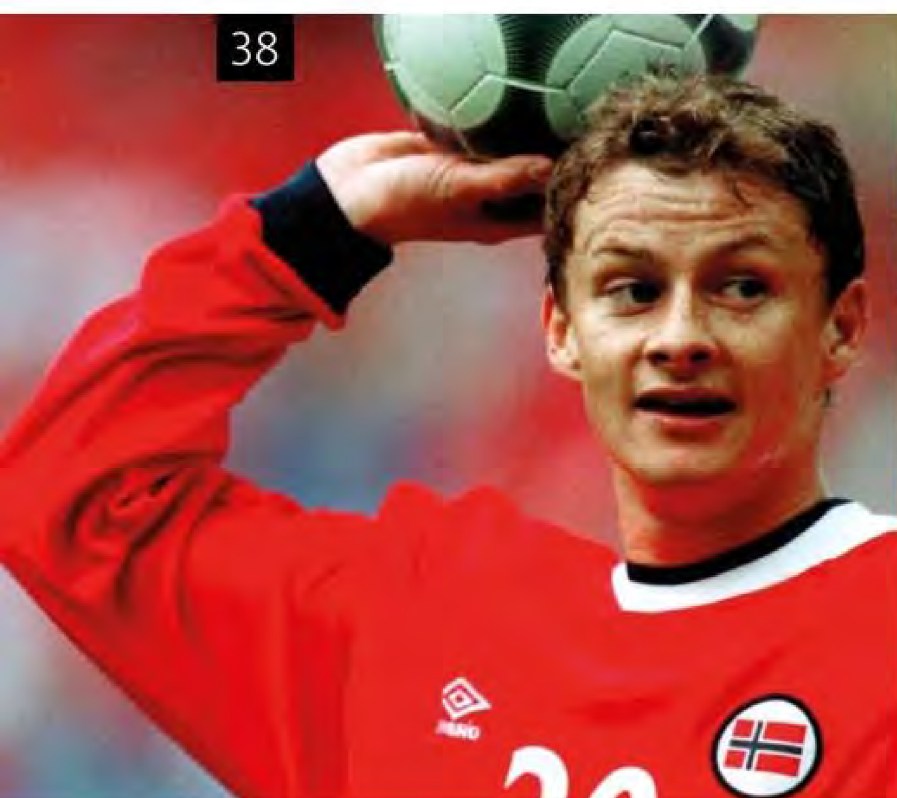




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HERE TO

Almost two years since their controversial takeover, Newcastle are going where no Magpie's flown for 20 years: the Champions League. Ahead of the curve their new owners plotted, they feel they have a man, a plan and the fans to sustain it – plus a sovereign wealth fund

COMPETE

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"YEEEESSSS!"

screamed Eddie Howe, thrusting a clenched right hand high into the air, on a late May afternoon at Stamford Bridge. A sweaty, sunburnt, occasionally topless Newcastle United away end responded in kind. On the final day of the 2022-23 campaign, Howe was punching a full stop to a remarkable journey in which the Magpies' boss and the club's new owners had transformed them from winless relegation fodder to a League Cup final and fourth in the Premier League.

Howe & Co had unlocked the door to the Champions League in just 18 months. He had spent most of that time straight-batting tough questions about the club's investment from Saudi Arabia, staying balanced through the highs and lows. As he walked across the pitch to applaud the supporters after the full-time whistle at Chelsea, he exploded for just a moment, the emotion at the achievement briefly visible.

The first stage of the Magpies' journey was complete, but there's more to come. This is the inside story of Newcastle post-takeover metamorphosis under Howe, and how the club's owners intend to sustain that success.

VOLCANIC ERUPTION

Newcastle are a club well acquainted with nadirs. One of the most pronounced and recent came at a moist Molineux in October 2021. Two blasts of Wolves' Eurodance goal music sandwiched a rare Jeff Hendrick strike for the Magpies, as 'We want Brucey out' chants greeted another lacklustre defeat.

Such displeasure at manager Steve Bruce had been an audible staple for the majority of a miserable start to a seven-game-old league campaign. No wins, three draws, four defeats, 16 goals conceded. It was match number 999 in the dugout for Bruce and he was in a real emergency situation. His side sat second bottom of the table, having also battled relegation the previous season, before a late rally secured a 12th-placed finish.

Federico Fernandez was Newcastle's captain at Molineux – somewhat bizarrely, he emerged for the second half wearing Javier Manquillo's shirt instead of his own. It encapsulated the club's dysfunction. "It was tough because the previous year we were in the same situation," the Argentine explains to *FourFourTwo* now. "The group knew the situation and how to come out of it, but it was not a good performance at Wolves."

Matthew Raisbeck, lead commentator for BBC Radio Newcastle, travelled back from the game that evening by rail. "They'd given up," he says of Newcastle's sodden support. "There was one lad, I remember it well, who told me that the season was over, that they were going down. He wanted them to get relegated because it would hurt [then owner] Mike Ashley, and that was all he had left."

Five days later, Ashley was gone. 'Cans?' had previously been the code word among fans – a one-word question posed after every update that contained even a semblance of hope that a takeover was imminent. The Toon Army had been under celebratory starter's orders for months, but their tinnies hadn't left the fridge.

An indication of the fans' desire for change in ownership came via a poll conducted by the club's supporters' trust – 93.8 per cent of members voted in favour of a takeover being greenlit by the Premier League.

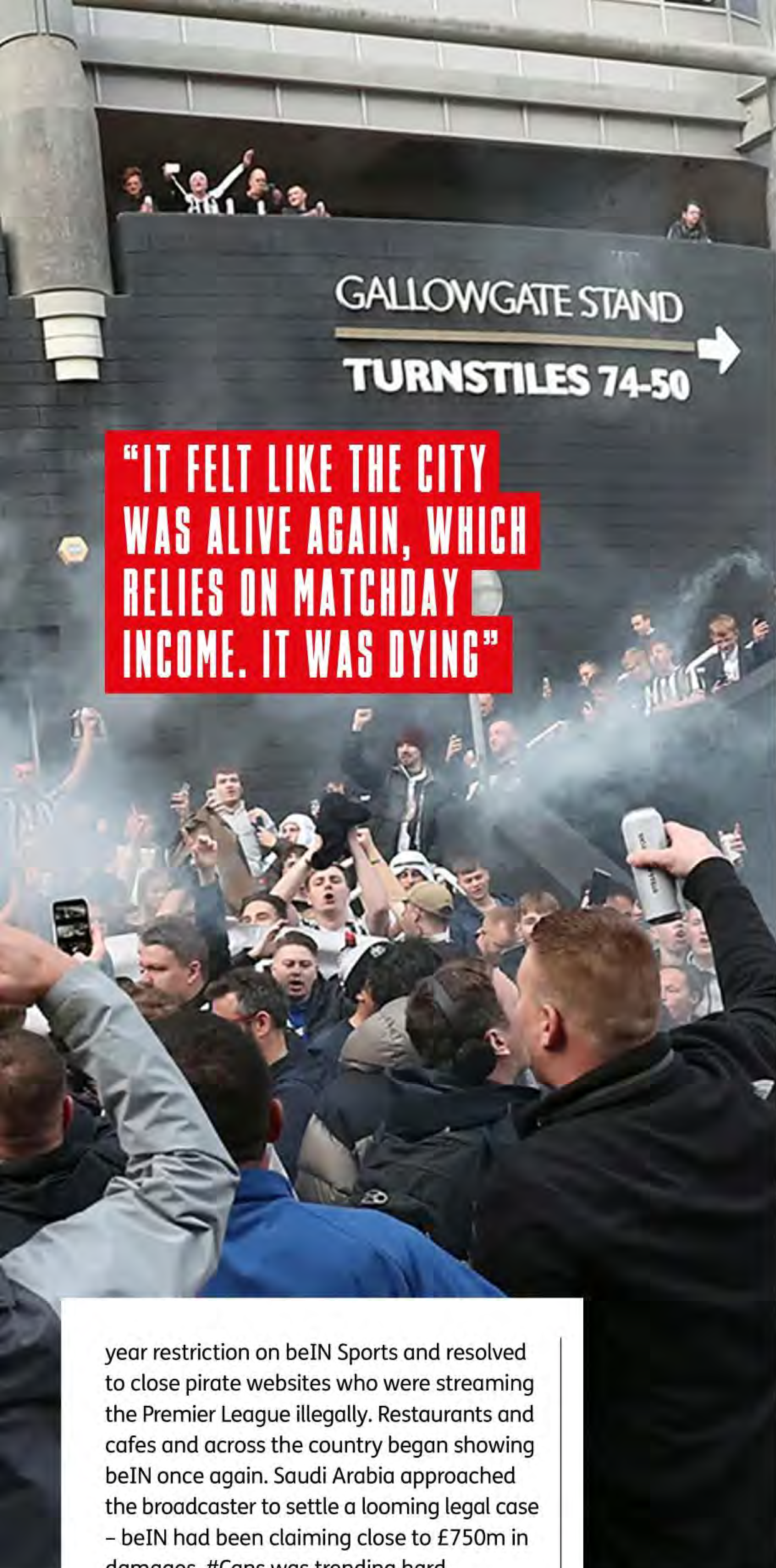


Clockwise from top "Time for #Cans"; Staveley and Ghodoussi own 10 per cent of the Magpies; the fans never gave up hope of happier times; Howe celebrates top-four football

PCP Capital Partners, RB Sports & Media and the Public Investment Fund were the prospective custodians, a consortium comprised of husband-and-wife business partners Mehrdad Ghodoussi and Amanda Staveley, billionaire British property developers the Reuben family and Saudi Arabia's sovereign wealth fund respectively. With estimated assets of £538 billion, PIF would be fronting 80 per cent of the deal.

Newcastle's defeat at Wolves marked 18 months since a price of £305m had been agreed with Ashley, who was finally ready to sell after 14 unhappy years. But there was a snag. Amid a political dispute, Saudi Arabia were blocking Qatar's beIN Sports network from broadcasting in their country – beIN had exclusively screened Premier League matches across the Middle East and North Africa since 2013 and had just renewed their contract for almost £400m. Despite Saudi Arabia getting in the way of that TV deal, PIF now wanted a seat at the Premier League table, through Newcastle. It was awkward.

The breakthrough came four days after Newcastle's miserable Molineux afternoon. Saudi Arabia had officially lifted their four-



"IT FELT LIKE THE CITY WAS ALIVE AGAIN, WHICH RELIES ON MATCHDAY INCOME. IT WAS DYING"

year restriction on beIN Sports and resolved to close pirate websites who were streaming the Premier League illegally. Restaurants and cafes and across the country began showing beIN once again. Saudi Arabia approached the broadcaster to settle a looming legal case – beIN had been claiming close to £750m in damages. #Cans was trending hard.

Within 24 hours, the Premier League approved the takeover, having received "legally binding assurances" that the Saudi state would not control Newcastle. But it left many questions, which some believe are yet to be answered (see page 42). How would Saudi Arabia's human rights record reflect on Newcastle? Would the league explain the legally binding assurances? Would Newcastle be signing Kylian Mbappe? And, er... what about Steve Bruce?

"I really can't remember Steve being down in any way," recalls Derek Wright, the club's head physio at the time. "Like the rest of us, he was incredibly excited about the future of Newcastle, even though he accepted that there would be changes."

Wright, who retired in the summer of 2022, had seen a lot in his 38 years at Newcastle. "We'd struggled at the start of 2021-22," he says. "That wasn't so much down to bad performances, tactics or anything like that, but all the takeover talk weighed heavily.

"Everyone knew for a long time that Mike Ashley was looking to sell the club – it meant that we were just trundling along, through no particular fault of anyone on the football side of things. I remember chatting to some colleagues in the days following the takeover, and it felt like a volcano erupting. Positivity swept over everyone, not just the supporters celebrating with their cans."

An international break meant Newcastle had to be patient for their first post-takeover match. Bruce was still in the dugout for the visit of Spurs to St James' Park – he'd had a brief meeting with new co-owner Staveley a few days earlier and been told to prepare for the game as normal.

"He knew the writing was on the wall for him, though, irrespective of the Tottenham game's outcome," a friend of Bruce tells *FFT*.

"Steve was just doing his job, trying to be professional until the last day," continues centre-back Fernandez. "No one in the squad knew what was coming next." Now 34, the defender left Newcastle at the end of that season, and says players rarely discussed the Saudi Arabia angle of the takeover.

"We tried to focus on the thing that we love and we do as professionals, which is playing football," he insists. "We put enough energy in at the training ground. The other things were obviously what other people were looking at – they needed to talk about that, not us."

As a one-club city, Newcastle and their fortunes set the mood of an entire area. "It was full of expectancy," says Alex Hurst, who runs fan channel *True Faith*. "It felt like the city was alive again. Newcastle is a drinking city around football – the city relies on matchday income for part of its economy, but it had been slowly dying since [Bruce's predecessor] Rafael Benitez left, because the football after him was so bad. Around 15,000 fewer people were going to games."

Supporter group Wor Flags, who crowdfund massive tifo displays inside St James' Park, hadn't produced anything for a Toon home matchday since 2019. When Benitez left, they followed him. Instead, they produced sporadic barbed protest displays outside the stadium in lieu of much excitement within it under Bruce. With Ashley gone, Wor Flags were back. Inspiration for their return display came via an unlikely source.

Big River by Jimmy Nail barely tickled the top 20 when released back in October 1995. The song is an emotional elegy to the height and subsequent decline, of Newcastle's once-thriving shipbuilding industry. Dire Straits frontman (and Geordie) Mark Knopfler performs guitar on the track that concludes on a touching note of hope. "'Cause this is a mighty town, built upon a solid ground, and everything they've tried so hard to kill, we will rebuild." Among Magpies diehards, it 'nailed' the sentiment of the moment.

Pre-match emotion – further ignited when Callum Wilson put Newcastle ahead after two minutes – was sobered by the visiting team that day. In Bruce's 1,000th game as a manager, Tottenham won 3-2. Three days later, the Newcastle boss was sacked.

The new owners weren't content to battle relegation. "Do we want to win the Premier League within five to 10 years?" Staveley had asked reporters on day one. "Yes."

THE NEW KEEGAN

Eddie Howe's first day as Newcastle United boss began with a couple of cones 10 metres apart, running trainers rather than boots and a series of ever quickening 'beeps'. The new manager was looking under the bonnet of the squad he'd inherited, via the beep test, most commonly performed on the first day of pre-season. Clips from the club's YouTube channel showed players such as Dwight Gayle, Sean Longstaff and Jamaal Lascelles easing beyond level 15 of the test. Anything above 13 is 'excellent' for the average Joe. ▶







"Miguel Almiron and Jacob Murphy were the best," chuckles Federico Fernandez. "Eddie wanted an intense team who played high, wanted the ball and played direct football. All the training sessions were very detailed – it was demanding stuff, really well organised and good preparation. It was quick for us, the first couple of weeks, to understand what he wanted and how the training would be. You needed to adapt quickly."

Howe's prognosis was positive. "They're a fit group, but I think we can top that up," he said. Such was the increased load, Jonjo Shelvey recalled climbing into bed at 8pm each night in the new regime's first week.

Howe was the 32nd permanent or interim manager under whom long-serving physio Wright had worked. The new gaffer's day-to-day impact could compare only to Kevin Keegan's arrival in 1992, when Newcastle were fighting relegation to the third tier.

"I'm a creature of habit," Wright tells *FFT*. "For years, I'd arrive at the training ground at bang on 7.30am. Eddie was always there before me. It was the same in the afternoons – I was among the last to leave, but Eddie always left after me."

Two days after the beep tests, Howe stood on the playing surface at an empty St James' Park. He'd spent the past 48 hours sowing the first seeds of development among his squad at the Benton training base. This time, wearing a smart, slim-fitting black suit and thin grey tie, he was ready to face the media for the first time as Newcastle boss, but first allowed himself a quiet moment. BBC Radio Newcastle commentator Raisbeck, at the ground to hear the new manager speak, had the same idea.

"I remember going to the seat where we commentate from inside the stadium, just to have a look at the pitch," he says. "Eddie was out there, looking up at the giant Leazes End and Milburn Stand, taking it all in."

There was a throatiness to Howe as he met the press. He acknowledged he'd done a lot of shouting during his first two days at training. Messages like "no jogging", "train as we play" and "if you think you're maxed out, you're not" echoed around Benton.

Howe told the media that "everything felt right" to accept the job as Newcastle boss. Questions on Saudi Arabia were met with a response that he was only there to discuss football. His new team were winless after 11 games, five points from safety.

Above Suited, booted and sore-throated before his first press briefing **Below** Training soon stepped up under Howe

After the press conference, Howe privately gathered members of the written media for an off-the-record huddle and asked them for patience, specifically regarding speculation linking squad members with moves away. "At his early pressers, Howe would say how impressed he was with the players he'd inherited," one local writer reveals to *FFT*.

"I remember on one occasion when the cameras were turned off, he stressed that he wasn't just offering cheap platitudes – he genuinely meant it."

Ahead of Howe's opening game in charge at home to Brentford, club doctor Paul Catterson strode towards him at the training ground. "I saw the doctor walking across the pitch and I was like, 'Oh no, he's coming for me!'" Howe later said. "I was like, 'For f**k's sake!' It was an absolute disaster."

Howe had tested positive for COVID and would spend his first match isolating in a hotel room at the Hilton on Gateshead Quayside. Newcastle drew a chaotic game 3-3, but other results meant they propped up the table. "That felt typical Newcastle – fortunately he was OK," says Raisbeck.

After Brentford came a routine defeat at Arsenal, before a Tuesday night showdown at home to Norwich. There were 25 games left, but it felt like a relegation decider. After just nine minutes, Newcastle were down to 10 men, as Ciaran Clark was dismissed for

"EDDIE SAW SOMETHING IN US, THAT WE WERE FIGHTING EVEN IN TOUGH SITUATIONS"

a professional foul. Fernandez came off the bench to help Newcastle salvage something. They drew 1-1. It was *something*.

"Eddie said after the game that he saw something in us – that we were still fighting, even in tough situations," says Fernandez.

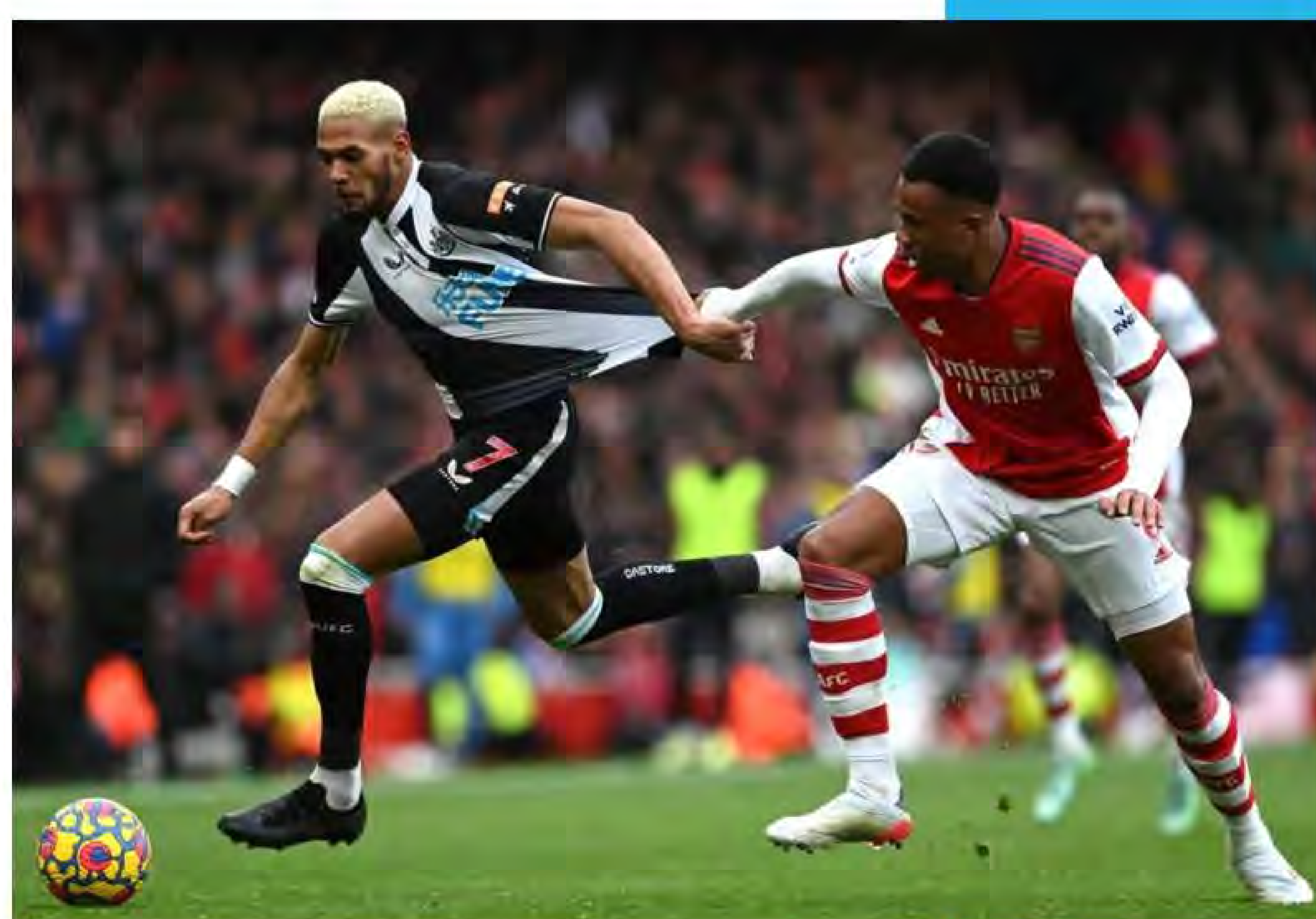
Clark's misjudgement had a bigger impact on one Magpies player than most. Joelinton dropped into midfield for the remainder of the match – up to that point, the £40m striker had managed just seven goals in 81 Premier League games and rarely looked comfortable. In midfield, he went smashing into tackles, protected the ball and linked defence with attack expertly. He left the stadium with the man of the match award.

"After that he was the new Pirlo!" laughs Fernandez. "Joey came as a No.9, then played on the wing, but he has the physicality to run big distances. He's Brazilian, so he has the quality. For me, football is about moments. It was crazy, because it was a tactical move that Eddie made because of that game, but that moment was so beautiful to see."

Overnight, Newcastle supporters went from complaining about Joelinton's price tag to chanting that he'd only cost £40m. This summer, he scored on his senior debut for Brazil. From midfield. Newcastle suddenly had a 'new' midfielder and a foothold, plus another winnable game against Burnley four days later at a now supercharged St James' Park. A first league win of the campaign, at the 15th attempt.







In the dressing room afterwards, a new ritual was born. "It was something that Eddie wanted to do when we won, to take a photo together in the changing room," explains Fernandez. "He told us in that moment what we were doing and why – to celebrate a nice moment with a picture of everyone involved. Physios, kit men, everyone."

EMBARRASSING ARTETA

Newcastle had to wait seven weeks for their next exultant dressing room photograph.

After the Burnley triumph, their next six matches in all competitions ended in four defeats, with 14 goals conceded. They had finished 2021 having conceded 80 times in the calendar year, an unwanted Premier League record, then lost at home to League One Cambridge in the FA Cup third round. It was new signing Kieran Trippier's debut.

"He could be excused for wondering what the hell he's signed up for – we, of course, have a life sentence, without parole," popular fan site NUFC.com lamented.

A fortnight later, the Magpies went to Elland Road. "Newcastle didn't deserve to win," admits *True Faith*'s Hurst. "Martin Dubravka pulled off two or three saves, Leeds kept missing chance after chance, then Newcastle showed real grit, a new kind of hardness they have now, where they can't be bullied and the opposing crowd doesn't bother them. Winning that game was huge."

Top to bottom Of course Jason Tindall is front and centre; the new Pirlo gets close attention; Bruno is loving life on Tyneside



The following day, the whole squad flew to Riyadh for a week of warm weather training. "A football decision," stated Howe. Amnesty International UK's chief executive Sacha Deshmukh's view was that "it will prove once again that sportswashing human rights crimes is the name of the game here, not football". The trip was controversial, though the benefits of the seven-day excursion were significant from a sporting perspective.

"It helped us get to know each other more," says Fernandez. "We played some matches during the night, had competitions, enjoyed the good weather, did activities together, we played some golf. It always helps, a couple of days away in a country that we wouldn't have probably gone to before. It surprised us in a good way. They treated us really well and we felt very welcomed. It was nice to see the owners over there and share a good moment with them."

Days after landing back in the North East, the squad had a trio of new team-mates: defenders Matt Targett and Dan Burn, plus Brazilian midfielder Bruno Guimaraes, the latter a flagship signing from Lyon costing up to £40m. With Trippier and Chris Wood, Newcastle spent nearly £100m that January transfer window. Combine the outlay across all 14 winter windows under Ashley, and it totalled only a fraction more.

Guimaraes' impact proved seismic, and not just on the pitch. A club insider tells *FFT* that the Brazilian's arrival added energy to the day-to-day mood at the training centre, and brought compatriot Joelinton further out of his shell. The pair had never met before, but have since acted as the best man at each other's weddings.

Beginning with that victory at Leeds, the Magpies won six games out of seven, drawing the other, to move 10 points clear of the relegation zone. BBC commentator Raisbeck noticed improvements in the team's fitness and structure. "You could see that players ▶



"NEWCASTLE HAVE IT ALL – PACE, QUALITY AND PHYSICALITY. THEY ARE SO AGGRESSIVE"

were thinking, 'Yeah, we're good enough, we can do this'," he explains. "The supporters were really on board, too, and they bought into it in a huge way. It just took off. Pretty much everything about the way they played changed. They went from a low block to high, from being passive to playing with intensity, from just trying to get the ball to Allan Saint-Maximin all the time to having more players contribute all over the pitch. It now felt like a real team effort."

The final home game of the season against Arsenal was a glimpse at what the team was capable of under Howe.

"F**king embarrassing!" yelled Gunners boss Mikel Arteta, after a 2-0 loss that ruined their chances of making the top four. "They were 10,000 times better than us," said the seething Spaniard, in a dressing room rant captured by Amazon documentary cameras. "That Monday evening was a celebration of Howe's miracle," says Hurst. "Arsenal were lucky to only lose by two."

Newcastle were finally United again. The momentum generated would send them hurtling into 2022-23 with unstoppable force.

"DO SOMETHING BIG"

At the beginning of last season, Manchester City manager Pep Guardiola was in one of his better moods as he addressed the media after a match at St James' Park. Maybe that was out of pure relief: the league champions had fought back from 3-1 down to salvage a point. "Newcastle have everything: they have pace, they have quality, they made it physical, it's a very difficult place to come," said Guardiola. "Newcastle were aggressive. We didn't have control."

The one thing missing perhaps was luck – striker Callum Wilson had limped off with a hamstring injury. "I get the impression that others at the club were concerned with Wilson's fitness record, and were very much in favour of bringing in a replacement," one North East writer tells *FFT*. "That wasn't a priority for Howe though, because he had such faith in Wilson." The pair had, of course, memorably joined forces at Bournemouth.

Newcastle's summer had perhaps not been as busy as expected. Goalkeeper Nick Pope and defender Sven Botman arrived for a combined £45m. Matt Targett's loan was turned into a £15m permanent deal, but that was largely it. Newcastle's new owners were taking Financial Fair Play seriously.

"It's definitely been challenging," admitted co-owner Jamie Reuben. "You've got to be controlled, especially with some of the other clubs – you've seen the amounts they've spent. Financial Fair Play means we can't do that just yet. We have to make sure that our pound goes further than a Manchester City, Chelsea or Liverpool." There was, though, wriggle room for one more summer deal.

PIF governor and Newcastle chairman Yasir Al-Rumayyan had been a sporadic matchday presence at St James' Park, but was inside the stadium to watch Wilson limp off against Manchester City and gave permission to "do something big". Five days later, Newcastle broke their transfer record to sign Alexander Isak for around £63m.

Inside a week, the former Real Sociedad and Borussia Dortmund forward opened the scoring for Newcastle at Anfield. Roberto Firmino equalised, before Liverpool's rhythm

AN ENGLISHMAN ABROAD...

Howe is the ninth permanent English boss to manage in the Champions League group stage or beyond



RAY HARFORD

Kenny Dalglish's former assistant (above right) was a pioneer as an English gaffer in the group stage of the Champions League, having stepped up to take the Blackburn job in 1995. They finished bottom, however. Leeds' Howard Wilkinson and Besiktas boss Gordon Milne had taken part in 1992-93, but didn't make it as far as the group stage.



BOBBY ROBSON

Wor Bobby joined Harford in failing to escape the 1995-96 group stage, at Porto. He suffered the same fate with PSV three years later, despite five goals from Ruud van Nistelrooy, but guided Newcastle into a second group stage in 2002-03 following a famous 3-2 win against Feyenoord. He remains the only English coach to manage more than one team in the competition.



HARRY REDKNAPP

'Arry isn't the continental type, so Spurs reaching the Champions League in 2010-11 was a bit like that *Only Fools and Horses* episode where Del Boy and Rodney jet off to Benidorm. Grandad didn't get arrested in this one but Peter Crouch did get a quarter-final red card at Real Madrid. A Gareth Bale-propelled side had defeated both Inter and Milan by then. Lovely jubbly.



GARY NEVILLE

G-Nev's near-four months as Valencia supremo yielded just one Champions League group game. Replacing Nuno Espirito Santo in December 2015, Neville knew a win at home to Lyon plus a Gent slip-up against Zenit would steer Los Che through to the last 16. What happened? Valencia lost and Gent won – ah well, there's always next time, Gary. Only there, er, wasn't.





was interrupted by some dubious ailments 'suffered' by Howe's men, with the manager confessing "we wanted to slow the game down". The hosts scored a 98th-minute winner and, as both benches clashed, police intervention was required. The Kop less-than-politely encouraged Newcastle to the exit.

"My ideal is that we're booed off every week when we go to away grounds," said Howe. "You don't want to be popular. We're here to win, we're here to compete – and we'll do whatever it takes." Newcastle would go almost six months unbeaten in the league.

A few weeks later, in the corner of the 18-yard box at Fulham's Craven Cottage, a looping ball fell out of the sky and on to Miguel Almiron's left foot. In the blink of an eye, the Paraguayan hit an instinctive volley and Newcastle were on their way to a 4-1 victory. It was the first day of October, but the goal of the month award had already been settled. Almiron would be named Premier League player of the month, too.

"I'd felt good before then, but the goals hadn't quite come," he recalls to *FFT*. "It was a question of confidence, and it began with scoring twice against Fulham."

Almiron notched seven goals in the eight league matches immediately preceding the mid-season World Cup break. In ex-gaffer Bruce's last full Newcastle season, Almiron had struck just four in the Premier League, a square peg in a round hole amid rumours of a transfer away from the club. In Howe's front-foot system, he was born again.

Newcastle weren't used to having players involved in major tournaments and, even if Almiron's Paraguay hadn't qualified, the World Cup hiatus arrived at an inopportune time after the Tynesiders had beaten Chelsea to cement third spot. "Bruno Guimaraes and Callum Wilson came back from Qatar, and neither of them looked fully fit," says *True Faith*'s Hurst.

When the January transfer window opened, the club were mere spectators. "Inside Newcastle, they preach privately what they preach publicly," insists Hurst.

Clockwise from above Almiron volleys a Fulham banger; Gordon arrived in winter; "Alex, we've got to go and get our suits measured!"



"The club are up against it, FFP-wise. We have to sell players to continue spending."

Towards the end of the month, there was movement – Jonjo Shelvey and Chris Wood joined Nottingham Forest, freeing up money for Newcastle to sign Anthony Gordon from Everton for £45m. An exciting transfer for an exciting young English player, but there was a bigger talking point on Tyneside.

"AM GAN TO GET ME SUIT MEASURED!" bellowed Dan Burn, paying homage to an iconic Paul Gascoigne quote after the local lad had helped Spurs reach the 1991 FA Cup Final. Newcastle had just won a semi-final of their own – beating Southampton 3-1 on aggregate – and were into the League Cup final, their first major showpiece since 1999. It was emotional. Perhaps too emotional.

The week leading up to the game against Manchester United was a very long one for Newcastle's players. Additional media duties, training, ticket clamour and travelling were all prefaced by a tidal wave of hope heaped on them by a fanbase who'd been waiting 68 years for a major domestic trophy.

Was this the moment?

"CHAMPIONS LEAGUE? I CAN'T EVEN PRONOUNCE IT"

As it turned out, the League Cup final was all over when Marcus Rashford made it 2-0 six minutes before half-time with an effort that deflected agonisingly beyond Loris Karius.

The Newcastle third-choice goalkeeper's most recent appearance for an English outfit came in *that* nightmare 2018 Champions League Final for Liverpool against Real Madrid, and although neither Nick Pope (suspended) nor Martin Dubravka (cup-tied) would have prevented either goal, their absence contributed to a wider crisis of confidence that Newcastle seemed to suffer in the unfamiliar final setting.

"It just felt like the wrong time for us," sighs Hurst. "The game was an enormous ▶



CRAIG SHAKESPEARE

Which gaffer guided Leicester to the Champions League quarter-finals in 2017? It was Claudio Ranieri, right? Wrong: Ranieri was sacked a day after a 2-1 defeat at Sevilla in the first leg of the last 16, so perennial assistant Shakespeare stepped into his first crack at the top job and promptly won the second leg 2-0, before succumbing to Atletico Madrid in the last eight.



FRANK LAMPARD

Super Frank's knockout stage record as a boss isn't the best: he lost 7-1 on aggregate to Bayern in 2020, then 4-0 to Real Madrid last season, though he was only caretaker for the latter, like Liverpool's Phil Thompson after Gerard Houllier's heart surgery in 2001. When Lamps was dismissed mid-campaign in 2021, Thomas Tuchel arrived for the knockouts and won the thing. Ah.



GRAHAM POTTER

Two of Chelsea's three coaches last season were English: defeat in their opening group game against Dinamo Zagreb spelt the end for Tuchel, so in came Potter, who beat Milan home and away as the Blues won the group, then overcame Dortmund in the last 16. Seven matches, five victories: no English boss can boast a better win percentage in the competition. Yay.



SCOTT PARKER

Parker's win percentage – not quite so good. Two games, two defeats, after his unlikely spell as head honcho of Club Brugge last term. Appointed on December 31, he took over a side that had triumphed 4-0 at Porto in the group stage, but the team was on the slide domestically. Under Parker, they lost 2-0 and 5-1 to Benfica in the last 16, and he was booted out by March.

"PIRLO? GATTUSO? TONALI IS SOMEWHERE BETWEEN THE TWO"

SAYS ALESSANDRO COSTACURTA

Champions League star Sandro Tonali joined Newcastle for £55 million this summer, sending Milan and Toon fans into differing frenzies. Rossoneri hero Costacurta tells *FFT* what to expect...

"There was a feeling of shock when Tonali moved to Newcastle – for Milan supporters, he represented the perfect player. He's a Milan fan, and on the pitch he has a winning mentality and attitude. He didn't have the captain's armband but for everyone, me included, he was the ideal Rossoneri skipper.

"I thought Sandro could stay at Milan his whole career, but he understood the significance of the fee that Newcastle had paid – with that money, Milan have signed three or four good players. In a certain sense, in the eyes of Milan fans, he was a necessary sacrifice. He also understood that joining Newcastle was an incredible chance for him to grow in the most important league in the world. He would have happily done it at Milan, but this is a big opportunity. He had to accept that Milan wanted to sell him.

"Tonali is a player who doesn't let his emotions out – he's always very serious, and he's in a serious relationship too. He doesn't go out to nightclubs if it isn't for a team party. Newcastle have made a great signing, he's a great professional.

"To begin with he was compared to Andrea Pirlo because they have similar hair and both started at Brescia, but above all because he played very well. Tonali has good feet, even if they aren't those of Pirlo yet. I know that Sandro feels more like Gennaro Gattuso, but he can become a proper player because he has so much quality. Gattuso is my friend, but he definitely didn't possess the quality of Tonali – Gennaro was a player who ran himself into the ground.

"Tonali said he wanted to be inspired by Gattuso, who gave everything on the pitch. Tonali is somewhere between Pirlo and Gattuso. He's tidy on the ball but runs a lot and is very aggressive. Tonali is also good enough to become a regular starter for the Italian national team.

"Knowing how he takes on his work, the first thing he'll be doing now is trying to learn English as quickly as possible. If Newcastle were drawn to play Milan in the Champions League, I'd be really surprised if the Milan fans whistled him. After his superb performances for the club, I think they would applaud him."



disappointment – Manchester United were very comfortable. I thought our fans didn't really turn up, flag waving aside. We didn't do ourselves justice as a club – if you want to be a big club it's got to be about winning, not having a good time." In the club's first real test under their new ownership, they failed.

In April, the Magpies passed a new exam in breathtaking fashion. It was fourth versus fifth in the Premier League, Newcastle three points ahead of Tottenham with a game in hand, but a defeat could have been hugely damaging to their Champions League hopes.

"THIS IS OUTRAGEOUS! NEWCASTLE UNITED HAVE... FIVE! I can't believe it!" commentator Matthew Raisbeck screamed over the St James' din as the home side led their Champions League decider 5-0 after only 21 minutes. They won 6-1. Newcastle had their statement. Tottenham had a more expensive squad, a much bigger wage bill (and stadium), Harry Kane, Son Heung-min and experience of qualifying for the Champions League. The Magpies shut the door on them.

True Faith's Hurst felt the landscape shift that day. "Newcastle have got Eddie Howe, who no one else really wanted," he says. "They've got players who've been written off. They've got fans who have been slagged off relentlessly by other supporters across the country, by the previous owner, by the previous manager. They've got Amanda Staveley, who was called a time-waster. They've got a playing squad for which they paid about a third less than Spurs overall, and they were 5-0 up after 21 minutes. That's why football is the greatest game. If everything happened the way it should, it wouldn't be that interesting. We'll probably never experience anything like that again. It was a privilege to be there."

Newcastle secured Champions League qualification with a match to spare, thanks to a nervy 0-0 draw at home to Leicester. Howe's side couldn't turn their possession into a goal and retreated for the closing 15 minutes, clinging to the point they needed. The tension transferred to the home support. During added time, Pope parried a stinging Timothy Castagne volley brilliantly. It was a pivotal moment, a scary reminder of how Newcastle used to concede. A valve released inside the stadium. Tension turned to elation. Newcastle had done it, without even needing a result at Stamford Bridge on the last day.

"In 2021-22 we were only thinking about saving ourselves from relegation," Miguel Almiron tells *FFT*. "But with the new players, coach and owners, the chips have changed for this club, the mentality is totally different. We're now thinking about bigger objectives







and that's because of the work we're putting in. When you win, everything feels better, but we're also surer of ourselves."

Prior to the game, Howe was asked if he'd allowed himself to actually say the words 'Champions League'. "I can't pronounce it!" he joked. Now, with Newcastle assured of a top-four finish, he wasn't so tongue-tied.

"We've shot ahead of schedule," he said, before acknowledging that there were some "big challenges ahead". Newcastle were a Champions League club again. It had been 20 years since you could say that.

FOURTH-PLACED PROBLEMS

"We can't continue to spend £200m in one year," Newcastle's sporting director Dan Ashworth said at a media event shortly after last summer's transfer window. Ashworth, the FA's former technical director, wasn't cheap himself. His high-profile acquisition from Brighton included a multi-million pound compensation package that required he be on gardening leave for six months before he could start work in the North East.

With Champions League fixtures now on their schedule, Newcastle are now in a race to drive up all off-pitch metrics and gain crucial ground on the European elite, from commercial revenue, social media following and brand identity – and awareness outside the UK – to stadium infrastructure and the training facilities. There is work to be done.

Daniel Haddad is the head of commercial strategy at Octagon, one of the world's largest sports marketing agencies, and has played an advisory role on deals that include Liverpool's partnerships with Expedia and Standard Chartered. He's well positioned to map out the road that Newcastle face.

"There are two elements," he says. "One is infrastructure. The biggest commercial departments aren't small operations. If you look at Liverpool, they've got significant internal resource to act on all commercial opportunities. Newcastle have already made some pretty good strides in terms of staffing up that commercial team. It's not as big a cost as the playing staff, but it can be quite a significant department to operate."

CEO Darren Eales and chief commercial officer Peter Silverstone, who have arrived in the past 12 months from MLS side Atlanta United and Arsenal respectively, are seen as simply the start of what's expected to be a steady flow of top-class individuals from the commercial world joining Newcastle. They'll help to hit revenue objectives and drive the club forward.

"The other thing is positioning in the marketplace, developing the brand, communicating what Newcastle United stands for and how they're different from other Premier League clubs. That's linking back into the club's heritage, creating a story that isn't just intertwined with the ownership. When you go into a room to pitch to brands for sponsorship, you have to really sell the story of Newcastle United."

Clockwise from below Ashworth will add nous as sporting director; new CEO Eales has moved from MLS; back in the big time; "Lads, it's Tottenham..."



In June, Newcastle signed a new £25m-a-year shirt sponsorship deal with Saudi Arabian events company Sela, majority-owned by PIF. A significant improvement on their previous agreement with Fun88, it was higher than deals at Aston Villa or Everton, but still around 50 per cent of the the value of a traditional Champions League club. Last year they partnered with e-commerce brand Noon (the Middle East's Amazon) on a sleeve sponsorship deal worth around £7.5m a year.

Two big commercial contracts coming from the Saudi companies raised eyebrows, but Haddad reasons that isn't as challenging a situation as one might think. "The Premier League have put in place a 'fair market value' process where deals must be pre-approved," he says. "Any related party transaction has to be flagged and submitted to the Premier League. The shirt deal they did this summer is a sensible value."

A third major commercial lever is the kit supplier – Newcastle's existing deal is with fledgling brand Castore. "I'd be surprised if it's a Castore kit renewal," one industry insider tells *FFT*. "There have been a series of discussions between the club and Adidas."

Haddad continues: "A key consideration is global distribution – the advantage of going with an Adidas or Nike is their global retail capability. But I'm pretty sure the biggest consideration will be the size of the upfront, guaranteed payments."

What about any brand's reputational nervousness when they consider partnering with a majority Saudi-owned football club? "There are plenty of brands aligning with state-owned clubs like PSG and Man City," he counters. "There might be some challenges on the ownership, but if you look at what City have done, the model of that is replicable. In 10 to 15 years, is it going to be such a talking point as it is now? I'm not sure it is."

Huge decisions and changes will need to be made over the coming years. One of the biggest and most emotional is whether to move stadium. Newcastle have played at St James' Park since 1892, but listed buildings behind the East Stand make development tricky, if not impossible. An extension to the Gallowgate End presents challenges, and even then could only have a modest impact on the 52,000 capacity. In July, more than 50,000 fans without season tickets bought club memberships that will enable them to enter a ballot for the few thousand matchday tickets that go on sale to the general public. In reality, Newcastle need a stadium closer to 80,000 in capacity.

"I'm undecided," says Raisbeck on the possibility of a stadium switch. "When you go to the new Tottenham Hotspur Stadium, you're overwhelmed by how unbelievable it is. If Newcastle had something like that, the commercial potential would probably be unlimited. But St James' Park is such a special place – it's got so many memories."

The new owners have publicly played ▶

"VERY QUICKLY, HARVEY WILL BECOME A FANS' FAVOURITE AT ST JAMES' PARK"

Adam Sadler coached Harvey Barnes for eight years at Leicester, including two spells as joint caretaker boss – the Geordie can't hide his happiness that the 25-year-old has joined Newcastle

"I'm absolutely buzzing for Harvey to join Newcastle, as he's such a top lad – he'll do brilliantly. Part of my job at Leicester involved watching him when he was on loan at MK Dons, Barnsley and West Brom. He had a big impact at those clubs. I'd meet him for coffee, go over his clips and give him feedback. He was totally engaged as a young player – he wanted the information.

"Harvey's got an incredible family around him. His dad Paul is a former striker who played for York, Burnley and others, and Harvey has benefited from that guidance. His numbers have been incredible for a winger in the Premier League – he scored 13 goals last season.

"He has terrific speed, which is a huge asset. He's a winger who plays on the left, but he's right-footed so he likes to drift in with the ball – he also has that ability to go on the outside and deliver crosses with his left foot. He's brilliant against low block defences or in counter-attacks on transitions, where there's a lot of space behind the defensive line.

"His job now, of course, will be fitting into how Eddie Howe wants to play, but Harvey's a fast learner. He'll very quickly become a fans' favourite, because what Geordies love is somebody who gets you on the edge of your seat.

"When we faced Eddie Howe's teams at Leicester, I was always struck by how together they were as a group of players and staff. You could see the connection. The strength of Newcastle last season was their collective. Harvey's personality will fit into that model, no question. After training, he wants to do extras – he's got this deep desire to keep getting better.

"He'll be very ambitious, but he's a very level-headed lad. That's a major strength – he won't get lost in the emotion."

"HARVEY'S SPEED IS A HUGE ASSET. HE'S BRILLIANT AGAINST DEEPER DEFENCES"



down the likelihood of a relocation from the stadium (above), but it will almost certainly be a hot conversation topic for the board.

Of more immediate concern is Newcastle's training ground. The facility, situated four miles to the north east of the city centre, became an ugly symbol of the Ashley era. An image of Newcastle players using outdoor paddling pools as ice baths often surfaced on social media as a stick with which to beat the former owners.

"Newcastle outgrew that place many years ago," admits Robbie Elliott, who played 142 league games for the Magpies across two spells in the 1990s and 2000s. Now running his own consulting firm advising sports organisations and athletes on health, wellness, performance and technology, he recently toured Newcastle's training ground.

"They've done some upgrades – there's a new reception, a larger dining hall, they've put in a team meeting room, the gym's in the best state it's been for years and they're going to extend again," he enthuses. "They know what they want. A lot has changed, but there's still a long, long way to go yet."

Problematically, Newcastle have already run out of space on their current plot – they either need to extend or move completely, both of which are expensive undertakings. "That conversation of, 'where next and when?' is already ongoing," reveals Elliott.

Fortunately, FFP doesn't place any limit on what can be invested into a stadium or training facility. The Reuben family, as 10 per cent owners, also brings serious property expertise to the table, particularly within Newcastle. They already own Gosforth Park racecourse in an affluent suburb of the city – could a training ground solution lie in the acres of parkland surrounding the track?

"It's not going to be overnight," adds Elliott of whichever location they come up with. "In the meantime, it makes it tricky for staff and operations. The sooner they can understand when that new training ground is going to be available and start working towards that target, the better."

Life is coming at Newcastle United fast, and keeping pace off the pitch has created hundreds of fourth-placed problems. The hierarchy are attempting to answer them, though there are only so many hours in the day. Money can't buy you time, but winning football games can. Over to you then, Eddie. ▶

"WHAT MAKES THE OWNERSHIP CONVERSATION DIFFICULT IS THAT, IRONICALLY FOR NEWCASTLE, NONE OF IT IS BLACK AND WHITE"

The Magpies' Saudi Arabia investment has divided English football down the middle. Lifelong supporter **Adam Clery** explains why it's left the fanbase in a tricky position

"We don't demand a team that wins, we demand a club that tries," read the banner. Such was the rot that had set in at Newcastle United in Mike Ashley's 14 years, that any concerns the club's fans had over a takeover merely extended as far as 'when', never 'whom'.

The two entirely avoidable relegations, the rebranding of the stadium as the Sports Direct Arena, the hiring of Joe Kinnear, the employment tribunal with Kevin Keegan, the failure to retain Rafael Benitez. The decision to release Jonas Gutierrez – a man who mere months prior had made his footballing return after battling cancer – by asking the also-released Ryan Taylor if he could "pass the phone to Jonas". Only the word count prevents me from going on.

Newcastle fans would, understandably, have greeted any new owners with the most open of arms by 2020. So much so, that when reports first emerged of the acquisition led by Amanda Staveley, the fact it involved an investment group that would make them the "richest club in the world" was almost a footnote on Tyneside.

The Public Investment Fund, the sovereign wealth fund of Saudi Arabia controlled by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (below), was about as far removed from the club's previous administration as it was possible to be. One was linked to a nation state with geopolitical influence on a global scale, the other was a guy from Walsall who flogged trainers on the cheap and once held crunch talks with a manager while eating a £7.95 spaghetti bolognese.

What rendered the Ashley era untenable was its overall aspirations. A one-club city with a famously obsessive fanbase, who had flirted with tangible success in recent memory, were simply incompatible with an owner devoid of ambition. Spending just enough to survive in the Premier League, advertising the club as a stepping stone to potential signings, and employing managers who wouldn't question those decisions.

It wasn't going to need a sovereign wealth fund to bring Newcastle United back from its necrosis, but that's what they got. They will be (and already have been) a team that wins. As that banner read though, it was merely that they became a club that tried that ingratiated the new owners with the vast majority of the fanbase.

That, for a lot of people, is the problem. Though the public face of the takeover consists of British business magnate Staveley, her British-Iranian financier husband Mehrdad Ghodoussi, plus British billionaire and investor Jamie Reuben and family, they account for only 20 per cent of the club's actual ownership. The remaining 80 per cent, and 100 per cent of the controversy, belongs to PIF.

What makes the conversation such a difficult one is that, ironically for this of all clubs, almost none of it is black and white. Even the very label of 'sportswashing', used time and again by the club's critics to condemn the takeover, is easy to dismiss for those who wilfully refuse to see a problem. Sportswashing was Berlin hosting the Olympics in 1936 to allay the world's fears over the political direction that Germany was taking. Sportswashing was American tobacco companies paying all of the major baseball stars to advertise their product when reports were beginning to suggest smoking was bad for your health. Sportswashing was Russia invading Ukraine in 2014 while they were hosting the Winter Olympics, safe in the knowledge that the event would dominate news agendas that week. Mass appeasement of a population through the distraction of sport on a national, continental or global scale.

That's not something that's even remotely possible in the fiercely tribal arena of English club football. For every one Newcastle fan dancing outside the ground with a tea-towel wrapped around their head, hundreds of supporters of other sides decry Saudi Arabia's human rights record, and the horrific murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi in 2018. How can you call it sportswashing, some Magpies fans will argue, when it's having literally the opposite effect?

Well, it's the bigger picture. Signing Harvey Barnes and announcing a fanzone in the city centre isn't "mass appeasement on a global scale", but the staggering sum spent this summer in the Saudi Pro League is. LIV Golf is. A potential joint World Cup bid with Egypt and Greece is, were that to go ahead. As difficult as it is to pin down exactly what role owning Newcastle United plays in all of that, it's part of the same project, run by the same people, and pushing the same ambitions. Saudi Vision 2030.

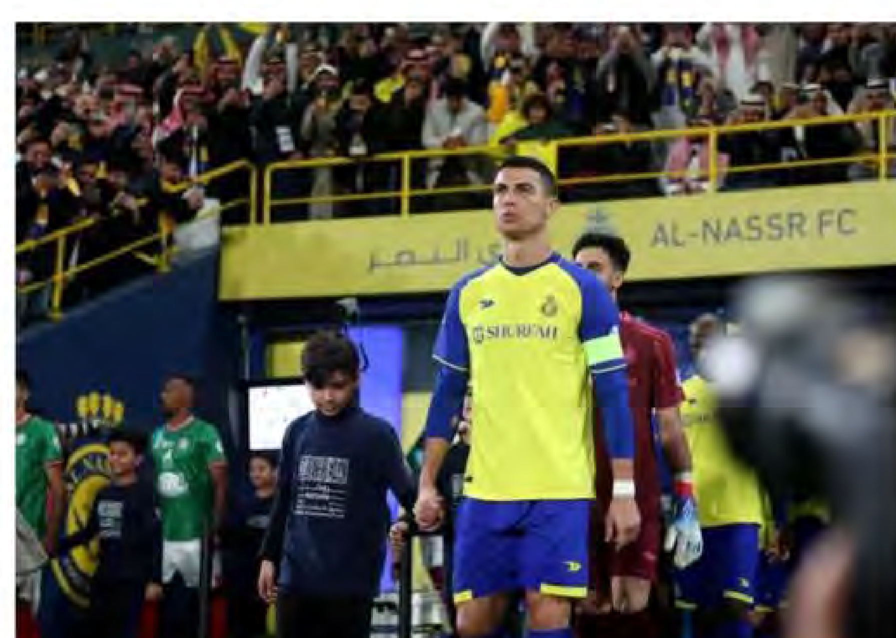
Under Bin Salman's rule, Saudi Arabia has embarked upon the biggest PR exercise the world has ever seen. Simultaneously trying to modernise the country economically and socially, while at the same time projecting an image of being an upwardly mobile and financially vibrant player on the world stage, they want the eyes of the entire globe, and specifically the west, to light up at the very sight of it all. Few things elicit that reaction easier than football.

Although there have been immediate comparisons to the equally as expensive but ultimately abortive attempts of other nations to 'buy' a major league (Oscar still plays in China, in case you're wondering), the mass influx of big name players to the Saudi Pro League is very different.

For all that most people scoffed at Cristiano Ronaldo's claims that it would soon be one of the top five leagues in the world, that is the cast-iron aim of the Saudi government – they've already proved this summer they have both the money and the plan to make that a reality. As *FFT* went to press, the lengthy list of names who'd been lured there during the current









Picture @Ettifaq_EN

transfer window included Karim Benzema, N'Golo Kante, Fabinho, Riyad Mahrez, Sadio Mané, Jordan Henderson, Roberto Firmino, Edouard Mendy, Kalidou Koulibaly, Ruben Neves, Marcelo Brozovic, Sergej Milinkovic-Savic and Allan Saint-Maximin, plus coaches Steven Gerrard, Slaven Bilic and Jorge Jesus.

Part of Saudi Arabia's grand plan, however far removed it feels, is Newcastle United. Ownership of a top-flight English team, and successfully turning them into a European football staple, provides PIF with two things vital to their long-term aims – credibility as a footballing entity who are here for the long haul, and a seat at the table of both the Premier League and UEFA. They now have a voice at the highest levels of the game, and have to be taken seriously as a result.

Thus, if there is sportswashing going on, it was never aimed at the fans, it was aimed at the governing bodies. When money talks, it doesn't do so wearing a replica shirt with a pint in its hand, it does it in an £8,000 suit at a FIFA conference in Zurich. Whatever your thoughts on the takeover, whether you're

"SOVEREIGN WEALTH FUNDS SHOULDN'T OWN CLUBS, BUT THEN NEITHER SHOULD MEN LIKE MIKE ASHLEY"

a Newcastle supporter or not, it's impossible to expect one fanbase to be the sole moral arbiters of the game.

Football has slowly allowed increasingly distasteful elements of business, celebrity, politics and consumerism to swallow it whole over the past few decades, and one group of fans was never going to be where the line was finally drawn.

The sovereign wealth funds of nation states with deplorable human rights records, and prehistoric laws regarding the treatment of women and social groups (including LGBT rights) they judge to be

Clockwise from top The banner that defines Newcastle; Gerrard and Hendo reunite; CR7 thinks Saudi football is on the rise; Benzema has also bowled up **Below** LIV Golf is part of a wider plan



"distasteful", should not be allowed to own Premier League football clubs. But neither should men like Mike Ashley. Newcastle fans tried their best to make the latter point for over a decade and were met with deaf ears by rivals of other clubs and executives alike.

That many Newcastle fans are returning the favour to those who, understandably, view the new administration as being worse by orders of magnitude is seen as fair game to some, and grossly hypocritical to others. The truth, as ever, is somewhere in between.

Until fans are given a shred of the power required to determine who does and doesn't control their club, the only place you'll ever truly hear their voice is within the confines of a matchday stadium. For Newcastle, whether it's boom or bust, it's right where it's always been.

THE BRIDGE TO HAPPINESS

Mauricio Pochettino's time at PSG was largely joyless, after an equally sad end to his Tottenham era. Now the Argentine wants to smile again and remind everyone of the talents that transformed Spurs and Southampton

Words Chris Flanagan

Boos rang around the Parc des Princes as soon as the final whistle blew to confirm Paris Saint-Germain were Ligue 1 champions. Mauricio Pochettino never imagined his first ever league title as a manager would be quite like this.

Finally, six years after missing out on the Premier League crown with Tottenham, his dreams dashed on an incendiary April 2016 evening at Stamford Bridge, Pochettino had the championship that his managerial career deserved. In truth though, it wasn't the start of something great, but an ignominious end.

PSG would win the 2021-22 league title by a margin of 15 points but, knocked out of the Champions League by Karim Benzema's dramatic hat-trick at the Bernabeu a month earlier, it wasn't enough. Fans had grown so restless that many walked out of the title-clinching match against Lens at the Parc des Princes 15 minutes before the end in protest.

When the visitors bagged a late equaliser, the full-time whistle prompted only jeers – Neymar, Kylian Mbappe and Lionel Messi sheepishly celebrated the title, their faces glum rather than joyous. Hell hath no fury like a Parisian scorned. ▶



Coaching Les Parisiens, in many ways, is the impossible job – by season's end, Pochettino's exit was inevitable. Ever since, the Argentine has felt he has something to prove.

TEARS AND WHEELIE BINS

When Pochettino was offered his first job in management, aged 36, some warned him not to accept it. Espanyol were third bottom of La Liga and had already burned through two coaches during that 2008-09 campaign. "Many told me that I'd be crazy to take over a side in crisis, it would go badly and I'd disappear from the map," he later explained in Guillem Balague's book *Brave New World*. "But I followed my gut."

Taking over a club with whom he'd had two spells as a player, the Argentine secured a surprise draw against Pep Guardiola's Barcelona in his very first game, in the Copa del Rey. A month later, Los Pericos claimed their first league win at the Camp Nou since 1982. Not only did they avoid relegation with ease, they ended up finishing in the top half of the table, rising to an impressive eighth by 2010-11.

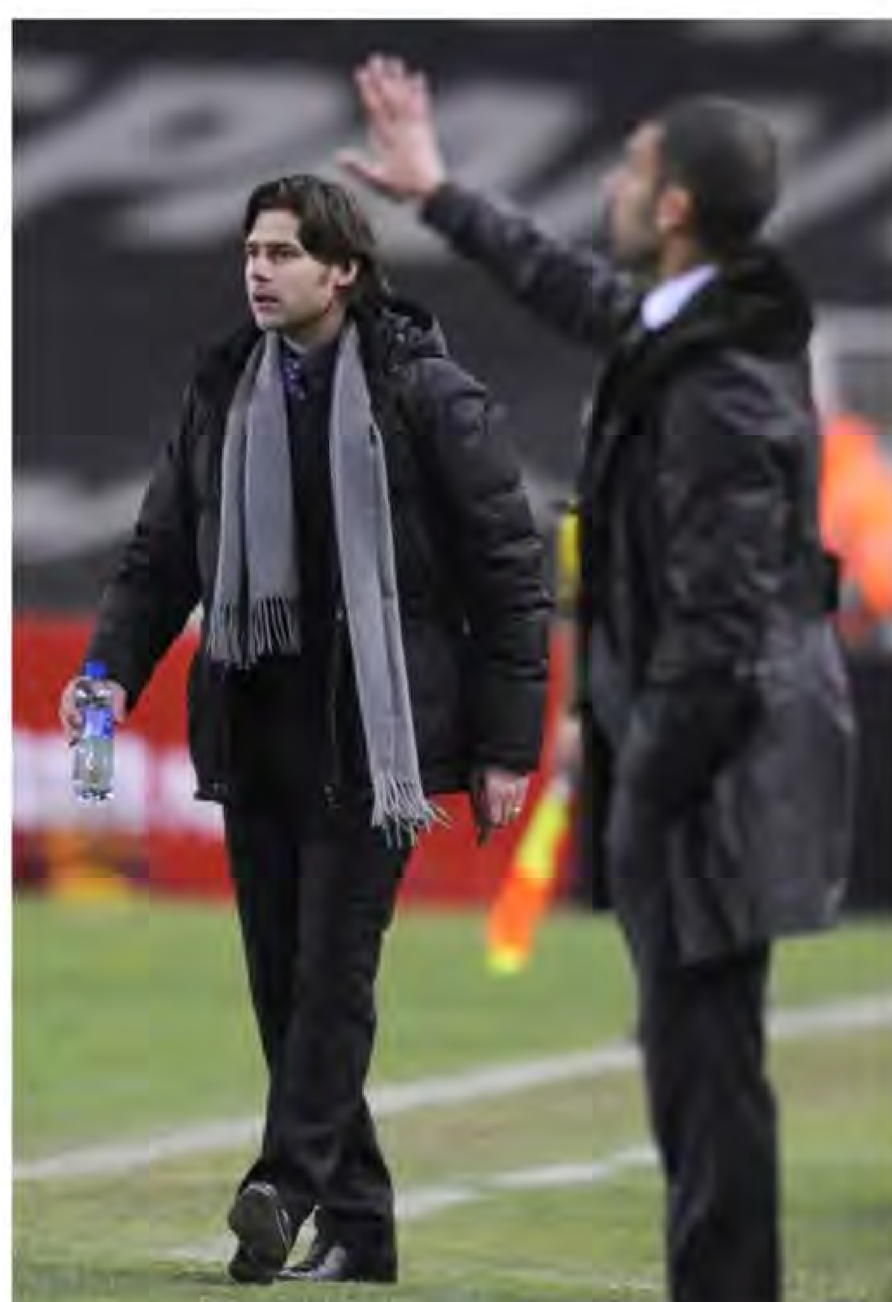
Financial problems eventually forced him to sell players and he departed in November 2012, frustrated, having previously turned down an approach from Sampdoria to remain with the Catalan outfit. "We dream of his return one day," his biographer Balague, a lifelong Espanyol fan, tells *FFT*. "We fell in love with him very early on, the kind of love that when he disappeared, it created a big gap. After him, no one is good enough now!"

Just two months later, amid reported interest from Dynamo Kyiv and Olympiacos, came Pochettino's surprise appointment as Southampton manager. Famously, Saints' executive chairman Nicola Cortese was criticised for hiring a man with no experience of English football in place of Nigel Adkins, who'd led the club into the Premier League and had started to recover from a poor start to the campaign, drawing against Chelsea in his final match.

If there was a risk of a few sceptical players, too, Pochettino soon won them over. "We met him on a very cold winter's day," former goalkeeper Kelvin Davis, one of the club's senior players back then, tells *FFT*. "It was snowing, and Nicola asked a group of players to go and meet the new manager in a box at the stadium. My instant feeling was he had a big personality, a big presence.

"We came out of the room afterwards and thought, 'These guys are serious', because it wasn't just Mauricio, it was his assistant Jesus Perez, his first-team coach Miguel D'Agostino and his goalkeeping coach Toni Jimenez. They come as a package, almost like one person – they're dedicated to each other, which is a massive strength. They spoke about the philosophy they wanted to introduce, the direction they wanted to go in. From the first training session, it was clear they knew exactly what they were doing."

Pochettino was careful not to change too much too soon. "I've had other managers where straight away it was, 'Right, this is how I work'," says Davis. "It wasn't like that – he observed the team, then slowly built the direction of the squad in a strategic way. You always felt that if you stepped out of line, there'd be consequences, but he wasn't looking for confrontation. He was very clever with how he managed people - he showed he was there to improve us, and we quickly realised he was doing exactly that."





Taking over a club whose academy had recently produced Gareth Bale and Theo Walcott, Pochettino inherited a squad with a number of rising stars. "Southampton chose him because of what he'd done with young players at Espanyol – he'd always been very happy to work with them," explains Balague.

Not that his sole focus was on junior squad members. "He's a serial developer, but that doesn't just mean developing the younger players," stresses Davis. "He improved the old ones as well - I was 35 or 36, but I earned a three-year contract when he was there. His methods are for everyone. We had a great batch of players – Luke Shaw, Adam Lallana, Morgan Schneiderlin, even people like Jason Puncheon, Jack Cork and Victor Wanyama. Rickie Lambert made his debut for England – he wasn't a spring chicken, but I'm convinced that was due to Mauricio's methods."



"SINCE PSG, IT'S NOT ABOUT THE HIGHEST HE CAN GET, IT'S WHERE HE WILL BE HAPPIEST"

Training wasn't easy under the new Saints manager, as he started to implement a high-energy style, but it was hugely beneficial.



"We'd play 11 versus 11 on Wednesdays, and the lads would joke, 'Bloody hell, we're playing two games a week, it's like being back in the Championship!'" chuckles Davis. "One session went on for an hour and 15 minutes – a continuous half, it didn't stop. I remember Morgan Schneiderlin sitting on the floor next to me after he'd tracked a run, saying, 'F**king hell, I think I'm going to die!' Then he just got up and ran again.

"For the next 11 versus 11 session, I took a clock off the wall at the training ground, got a green wheelie bin and stuck the clock on top of it by the pitch, which was as brave as I'd want to be with Mauricio! But they understood the joke.

"His gym sessions were hard, too. When you hear the expression, 'I'm going to go home and put my feet up', it comes from people doing exactly that because they feel they need it. After a Mauricio session, that was the first time in my career that I needed to go home and put my feet up! Some hated the gym sessions, but we also loved them."

Clockwise from above "Yay, we won the title..."; Poch had a great start at Saints; Pep's Barcelona were a surprise Espanyol victim

As at Espanyol, Pochettino eased Saints away from relegation danger. Standards were hugely important.

"There was one midweek game when we trained on the previous morning, and then travelled," says Davis. "Mauricio didn't speak to anyone all the way up, he had the hump. When we arrived at the hotel, he took his bag and went straight to his room, then called a meeting before dinner. He put on the video of that morning's training, saying, 'This isn't good enough, this isn't the standard'. If we did that, we were definitely losing the game tomorrow. He was also intelligent enough to know that the group could take it. The next day, we won the game."

The following season, Southampton finished eighth in what would turn out to be the Argentine's only full campaign at the club. "After the last game of the season, you do the lap of appreciation to thank the fans, and we were waiting in the corridor to go out," remembers Davis. "Jesus said, 'The manager's in his office, just go'. I said, 'The fans will want to see him, let's all go out together'. I went into his room and he had his head under a towel – he was upset, he obviously believed that was his last game. It showed what the club meant to him. We got him out, he did the lap of honour and it did end up being his last game in charge."

TEN MINUTES FROM THE SACK

A fortnight later, Tottenham paid the buy-out clause in Pochettino's contract to take him to White Hart Lane. In north London, he didn't arrive into an easy situation. Spurs had just finished a disappointing sixth, in the first ▸

season after Bale's departure to Real Madrid. Signings like Roberto Soldado had backfired, and the squad needed an overhaul.

"It wasn't a happy place – we had to throw open the windows, bring in some fresh air and change the mentality," Pochettino later explained. "We were being asked to turn a load of dirty, wrinkled laundry into a pile of clean, neatly folded and ironed clothes. The dressing room was full of figures who at some point had been considered stars, but had lost their way."

Turning things around took time: after Pochettino's first nine Premier League games, Spurs sat 14th in the table. "He tried to apply things he thought could be useful, but they didn't work," continues Balague. "There was a game at Aston Villa when he thought he was going to be sacked." Spurs were trailing with less than 10 minutes left. "I looked at Toni, Jesus and Miki, and told them, 'Pack your bags tonight, because tomorrow we're going home'," Pochettino later revealed.

In 2021, Levy sacked Nuno Espirito Santo after 10 league games – in Pochettino's 10th match, things turned around: Nacer Chadli equalised, before substitute Harry Kane fired home a deflected 90th-minute free-kick, his first league goal under Pochettino. The striker was yet to start under the new boss, but together they would transform the club.

"Before and after that game, Mauricio had a clear idea of what a changing room should look like, and the type of people he needed," says Balague. "They had to be players who were energetic, disciplined, who followed the lead, who may challenge you but still let you mould them. He didn't stop until his changing room at Spurs looked like that. He was given time, which helps. It was two or three years before you saw the best Spurs."

In came Dele Alli, Son Heung-min and Toby Alderweireld in the summer of 2015, and Spurs quickly moved in the right direction – so quickly that they fell agonisingly short of winning the title in Pochettino's second season, their hopes ended when they let a two-goal lead slip at Chelsea in the Battle of the Bridge as 5,000-1 outsiders Leicester were confirmed as champions. Pochettino's side slumped to third behind Arsenal after a 5-1 loss at already-relegated Newcastle on the final day, a performance that irked their manager for the entire summer.

"We didn't seem to care – you should all be ashamed," he told his squad when they returned for the new campaign, believing the St James' Park loss had to be addressed before they could move on. That campaign, they finished second with 86 points, 16 more than they'd amassed the year before.

In 2017-18, they bagged a top-three spot for a third consecutive campaign, winning at Chelsea for the first time since 1990. Spurs' long wait for a trophy was growing, though: in 2018-19, a League Cup semi-final shootout loss at Stamford Bridge was tough to take, with the Champions League their only route to silverware. Beating Borussia Dortmund home and away proved Tottenham's mettle.

No one could doubt the attitude he had instilled in his squad when they defeated Manchester City in the last eight, then Lucas Moura's 96th-minute winner, a third second-half goal, decided the semi-final at Erik ten Hag's Ajax. "Thank you, football," a tearful Pochettino said, having guiding Spurs to their first tournament final. "Without football, these emotions are impossible. When you love football, it's not a stress, it's a passion."

The final against Liverpool was over inside a minute after Moussa Sissoko conceded an early penalty for handball. Pochettino's reign never recovered. Spurs had won just three of their final 12 league games, matching those figures to start the 2019-20 Premier League. They also lost 7-2 at home to Bayern Munich.

The Argentine had become increasingly frustrated by a lack of squad investment. "If a house falls down, everyone sees it, but you have to anticipate that it's going to fall," he later said. The club had not signed a single player during the summer of 2018, or the January 2019 transfer window. "Maybe the club need to change my job description, because my job now is to coach the team," he fumed. Plenty shared his exacerbation.

"He wasn't allowed to renew the squad, and it all collapsed a bit," recalls Balague.

Despite those stellar Champions League achievements months earlier, a 47-year-old Pochettino was sacked in November 2019, with Spurs 14th. "Only time will tell if it's the right decision," admitted Levy.







Clockwise from above "BUY ME SOME PLAYERS DANIEL!"; media japes and group gains with Spurs

THOMAS TUCHEL: TOUGH ACT TO FOLLOW

Pochettino would wait 14 months before returning to management with PSG, where he'd spent two years as a player from 2001. Like Spurs just over a season earlier, Les Parisiens had sacked their manager, Thomas Tuchel, mere months after he'd taken them to a first ever Champions League final, losing to Bayern Munich in Lisbon. Like Spurs, they were underperforming in the league – third at the turn of the year, a point off top spot, despite being clear favourites for the title.

Pochettino guided PSG to a 5-2 aggregate triumph over Barcelona in the Champions League last 16, then helped them to gain revenge on Bayern in the quarter-finals, but Manchester City beat them in the semis. Worse still, Lille took the Ligue 1 title and predecessor Tuchel went on to clinch the Champions League with Chelsea.

"When he arrived at PSG, I wrote a story explaining how he'd been praised for his work in England, and he'd been so good in press conferences," explains *L'Equipe* writer Pierre-Etienne Minonzio. "Soon, journalists covering PSG said to me, 'Mate, you must have been lying in that article, he's awful at press conferences here!' At PSG, they were always the most awful thing you could imagine. He only spoke a bit of French, so it was in Spanish with translation, and he was

overwhelmingly cautious – he never said anything about anything.

"At Spurs, he was the only one to speak, because Daniel Levy almost never gave any interviews and there wasn't a sporting director who spoke. At PSG, the sporting director Leonardo had a direct line with the media and the president Nasser Al-Khelaifi also gives interviews sometimes.

"Pochettino was in a situation where he wasn't the master of communication, and before him there was Tuchel, who more or less left because he was too offensive in his communications, and Leonardo wasn't happy with that. Pochettino thought, 'I don't want to make the same mistake as Tuchel, I'll be very cautious', but it was *too* cautious. When a guy always gives short answers, it creates a sense that he's not happy to be there, that he's not at ease."

In his first season, Pochettino did finally win his managerial career's first trophies – the Trophee des Champions and the Coupe de France, shaking off the criticism that for all his fine work as a coach, he'd never won anything. That summer, the club's owners signed Messi to play alongside Neymar and Mbappe, but it created an imbalanced squad.

"Pochettino was good at man-managing the stars, there was no tension," explains Minonzio. "But he also felt trapped, because if you play all three of them, it's impossible to win the Champions League – at least two of them don't work when you don't have the ball, and in Europe that means you're dead. Pochettino never had the courage to put one on the bench for a big game. Maybe he knew he didn't have the power to do that, because Al-Khelaifi wouldn't be happy."

For fans and owners, the hope had been that the new front three would finally pop the Champions League cherry – instead, all three were on the field as PSG capitulated to Real Madrid at the Bernabeu in the last 16. Leading 2-0 on aggregate heading into the final half hour, Les Parisiens conceded three Karim Benzema goals.

"In Pochettino's first season, they reached the Champions League semis and players felt that his calm management style helped them," says Minonzio. "So it was frightening that in spite of that, he couldn't prevent the team falling apart under pressure at the Bernabeu. That's why he didn't keep his job. At PSG, if you lose before the Champions League quarter-finals, you have to leave."

Angry supporters vented their frustration during the next league match at home to Bordeaux, even though PSG won 3-0 and were romping to Ligue 1. A month later, more boos accompanied that title-clinching Lens draw. Pochettino's relationship with sporting director Leonardo was difficult – both were shown the door after the season's end. More protests followed without Poch in 2022-23, as PSG suffered another Champions League exit in the last 16 under Christophe Galtier.

"The PSG problem is the manager doesn't have authority," says Balague. "Even though Mauricio had a great relationship with Nasser, there was no real space for the manager – it was a matter of keeping the balance, pushing as much as he could, but not so much that it took the top players out of their comfort zone. It's frustrating for a coach when you can't do as much as you'd like to.

"He was there for the first year of Messi, Mbappe and Neymar and did well, all things considered. But in Paris he found that if you end up doing things that aren't why you got into management, it might make you rich but it doesn't make you particularly happy."

Pochettino kept his north London house in Barnet and was interested in a return to the Premier League last summer, only to narrowly miss out on the Manchester United job to Erik ten Hag, his opposite number on the greatest night of his managerial career in Amsterdam in 2019.

Other clubs were keen on him, too, even before he commenced talks with Chelsea following the departure of Graham Potter.

"Manchester United had a choice last year and they went for the other guy – on two previous occasions they'd approached him but he was at Tottenham at the time," says Balague. "He's had other approaches since PSG – he got Aston Villa, he got Nottingham Forest, he got Leeds, but he thought, 'No, it doesn't feel right'. When you're at the top, you want to remain at the top, so he's been waiting for the right time.

"He said no to Chelsea after Tuchel left. He sensed they'd already made their mind up on bringing in Graham Potter, and the fans were also missing Tuchel, who'd won the Champions League. It's difficult to replace somebody like that. I don't think Chelsea were offering as much power and authority as he wanted back then, either.

"He wanted his next project to be about winning. Now he's won some trophies at PSG, he's hooked on that. But it also had to be a job that would make him and his coaching staff happy, and wouldn't stop them doing the things they're very good at. After PSG, he sees his career in a different way – it's not just about the highest he can get to, it's where will make him the happiest."

Perhaps his words after that famous Ajax triumph four years ago summed it up best. "When you love football, it's not a stress, it's a passion," the Argentine said back then. Despite everything that's happened since, that passion is inside Mauricio Pochettino. He's ready to get back to work.







"POCHETTINO KNEW HE DIDN'T HAVE THE POWER TO BENCH MESSI, MBAPPE OR NEYMAR"

Clockwise from top right "Will you defend for me, Kylian?"; Messi business; trophy delight

WE ARE PREMIER LEAGUE

Luton's Kenilworth Road home may not be anyone's idea of luxury, but it will host Premier League football this season after the Hatters' unexpected rise back to the top, via F1, Manager Idol and five years in non-league...

Words Chris Evans

It was a call that will remain with Mick Harford for the rest of his life. Manager of Luton Town in the summer of 2008, Harford was at Warwick University doing an FA diploma, keeping an eye on his phone. That day, he was waiting to discover the verdict of a Football League investigation into financial issues, which had blighted Luton for a decade.

Only a week previously, the cash-strapped Hatters – preparing for a season in League Two after back-to-back relegations – had been hit with a 10-point deduction after the FA found the team's former directors guilty of misconduct over payments made to agents. Today, Harford was braced for more bad news, but not quite to this extent.

Luton had been deducted a further 20 points, the most severe punishment handed out by the Football League, because of a failure to secure an insolvency agreement that satisfied HMRC. A month before the season had even started, a combined 30-point shortfall left them staring another relegation in the face, and a depressing drop into non-league for the first time in 89 years.

"It was a sad day," Harford tells *FFT* now. "As a club, we believed we could overcome it. When you look back, they should have just relegated us, so we could start afresh. It was a massive burden to carry 30 points."

Rotherham and Bournemouth were both hit with 17-point deductions in the same division that year but survived – the latter after appointing Eddie Howe as manager mid-season, setting them on a path that took them all the way to the Premier League.

For Luton, 30 points was too much to claw back – they finished bottom, relegated after a draw at home to Chesterfield, with four games to play. Until 2014, for five seasons, they remained marooned in the Conference.

Few expected what happened next. On May 27, 2023, against Coventry City at Wembley, came a fourth promotion in nine years, and ascension to the Premier League. After 31 years away, Luton Town had returned to the top flight of English football.

"AND THE WINNER IS... MIKE NEWELL"

Things are rarely dull at Kenilworth Road. A First Division mainstay throughout most of the 1980s, Luton weren't there to simply make up the numbers. Back in an era when the chasm between England's haves and have-nots was far smaller than it is now, the Hatters enjoyed three successive top-10 finishes, reaching two FA Cup semi-finals and back-to-back League Cup finals – beating Arsenal in the first of them in 1988, courtesy of a 90th-minute Brian Stein strike. They would have played in Europe, had English clubs not been suspended at the time.

But the Bedfordshire side's glory years weren't without controversy, with Kenilworth Road infamous for its artificial pitch, which some claimed gave the Hatters an unfair advantage. Although a Football League investigation – consisting of bouncing and rolling balls on the pitch from an array of contraptions – found the surface didn't favour the home side, the league introduced a ban in the top two tiers for the start of the 1991-92 season. In their first campaign back on grass, Luton were relegated from the top division, pipped by Coventry.

The end of their 10-year tenure at the top table couldn't have come at a worse time, ahead of the inaugural Premier League season and the riches that followed. Luton were relegated again in 1996, then to the fourth tier in 2001. Money was tight and though the club recognised the need to leave Kenilworth Road, they couldn't finance it because they didn't own the land.

"In the mid-90s, it was a case of hanging in there," recalls BBC Three Counties' Luton commentator Simon Oxley, who has covered the club since the '80s. "They were difficult times and it was all built around trying to get a new stadium. There were various projects, with the focus on the so-called Kohler Dome, under the chairman David Kohler."

The idea never got off the ground, though even that wasn't as bizarre as when John Gurney bought the club in 2003, complete with grand plans to build a 70,000-seater, multi-sport stadium next to the M1, with a removable pitch on stilts, and a Formula One track around the site.

Gurney also planned to rebrand the club London Luton and mooted the idea of merging with Wimbledon, shortly before

Right Mike Newell led Luton to the League One title in 2005, but was later involved ina sexism row **Below** The club's Kenilworth Road stadium... will Premier League players fancy it?

> "DOCKING 30 POINTS WAS A DEATH SENTENCE FOR THE CLUB – FANS STILL HAVE A FLAG THAT SAYS 'BETRAYED BY THE FA'"







CHAMPIONS 2005 LUTON TOWN



the club made the move to Milton Keynes. If that wasn't enough, he also sacked popular manager Joe Kinnear, who'd led the Hatters back to the third tier, by letter. Luton fans threatened to boycott the club and avoid renewing season tickets in an attempt to force him out. "We knew John Gurney from his days at Bedford Rugby Club, which wasn't a happy time for them," says Oxley. "There were warning signs as soon as he walked through the door."

Gurney and his mysterious consortium weren't willing to bend, though, and came up with an idea they were sure would bring in revenue and get fans back on side. Luton would host a Manager Idol competition to decide the new boss, with supporters calling a premium phone line to cast their votes.

The three final contenders were the recently sacked Kinnear, Steve Cotterill and Mike Newell, who'd left Hartlepool United. On the day of the announcement, Kinnear claimed he'd had no contact with the club – with Cotterill ruling himself out of the race, it left Newell as the last man standing. Luckily enough, a late flurry of votes saw Newell gazump favourite Kinnear and the, er, competition was saved.

"The whole thing was a farce," says Luton supporter Steve Moore. "There had been protests calling for Gurney to give Kinnear his job back, so it was no surprise he was an early frontrunner. We knew there could only be one winner and that was Mike Newell.

"Manager Idol was like all Gurney's ideas, a desperate attempt to appease the fans, but we could see through it. We tried to force him out any way we could, but Gary Sweet, who's now our CEO, and the rest of the supporters' trust worked out how to get him out. It's incredible what he managed to do."

Sweet realised that fans could buy shares in Luton's biggest creditor, Hatters Holdings, then call in the debt on the club to force it into administration and take control away from Gurney – a plot that was successful.

Newell stayed on as manager and led the club to the League One title in 2005, before securing a top-half finish in the Championship the next season. Any feeling of positivity was short-lived, though, as the soap opera started once more.

The Hatters made another decent start in 2006, but their form nosedived, coinciding with defender Sol Davis suffering a stroke on the team bus on the way to Ipswich Town. Thrashed 5-0, they lost seven of the next eight matches, during which Newell became embroiled in a sexism storm after claiming the appointment of female assistant referee Amy Rayner for a game against QPR was "tokenism for politically correct idiots".

Newell kept his job after apologising, but couldn't escape the axe a few months later when he criticised Luton chairman Bill Tomlins for not reinvesting money from player sales. By then, the club were already on course for League One, and Tomlins himself departed a month later, having admitted to making irregular payments to agents, triggering an FA investigation.

By November of their third-tier campaign, Luton slid into administration, resulting in a 10-point deduction which contributed to their second successive relegation.

When the FA investigation hit them with a further 10-point deduction for League Two, closely followed by the Football League punishment that put them on -30, fans were extremely disgruntled. "There's still anger about how it was dealt with, because it was the indiscretions of previous directors," laments Moore. "Docking us 30 points was a death sentence as a Football League club. Our fans still have a flag saying 'betrayed by the FA'. We still sing songs about it."

BEWARE ALFRETON

Luton picked up 56 points on the field in League Two – only the ninth-lowest tally in the division – and even won the Johnstone's Paint Trophy, beating Scunthorpe in front of 42,000 Hatters at Wembley.

"We were still able to attract some very good players to the club," says Harford, who was in charge throughout the season. "We signed Chris Martin on loan and others. You'd think players wouldn't want to sign for a club with a 30-point deduction, but they did because of our size. Relegation was really tough and hit me quite hard. I was the manager, so I felt responsible. People would say, 'Mick, don't worry about it, you had a 30-point deduction, what chance have you got?' But I always believe that if I'm facing any challenge, I'll come out the other side."

The Conference wasn't a cakewalk either – only six wins in the first 13 league games signalled Harford's departure. "We were everyone's cup final because we were the biggest club in that league," he explains. "We lost at home to Stevenage and I left by mutual consent. I sat down with the board and said, 'Maybe we need to find a manager who knows this league better than I do'."

Even hiring non-league aficionados didn't provide an immediate answer. Richard ▸

"IT'S AN INCREDIBLE STORY, YOU COULD MAKE A FILM ABOUT IT. I DON'T THINK IT'LL EVER HAPPEN AGAIN"

Money, Gary Brabin and Paul Buckle all fell agonisingly short in the play-offs – Luton lost on penalties to AFC Wimbledon in the final in their second Conference campaign. Along the way, there were humbling league losses, too – a 3-0 defeat at Alfreton Town and a home reverse to Hyde.

"When Luton beat Norwich in the FA Cup in 2013, Conference beating Premier League, you thought, 'OK, use that as a springboard'," says Oxley. "The next Saturday, they were awful at Barrow and lost 1-0. All that elation at Norwich, then a 10-hour round trip to Barrow, realising they're still going to be stuck in the Conference."

Just weeks later, Buckle was replaced as manager by John Still, who'd previously led Dagenham & Redbridge into the Football League. Arriving in late February, he wrote the season off, deciding to use the final few months of the campaign to cast his eye over the squad, for an assault on promotion the following year. It was a brave move – the pressure was on, after only three wins in Still's first 13 league matches, then a slow start to the next campaign.

Things came to a head at half-time during a home match against Halifax in October, when a supporter got into an argument with skipper Ronnie Henry. Still invited the fan to training, to see how hard the team was working to succeed. "I said 'If you've got something to say, come down to training'," the Hatters' former boss tells *FFT*. "You're a supporter, I understand you're angry, but let us tell you what we're trying to do'.

"For the next home game, the fan came to listen to the post-match team talk, then we started bringing supporters onto the pitch for every end-of-game huddle. You'd see supporters at the end of the game saying, 'Bring me on'. In the end, we were getting two or three with their kids. I'd done something like that before but, at Luton, I felt I needed the supporter identification. Everyone felt they were part of the team."

From then on, there was a feeling among supporters that Still understood what the club meant to them. An upturn in form helped – after recovering from 3-1 down to beat Halifax 4-3, they won 16 of their next 20 games. The Luton Town family were back together. "I tried to talk about values," Still says. "Players are valued, but supporters also have value, the groundsman has value, the ladies in the canteen too. If you want to be successful, the players aren't going to do it on their own."

Above Gaffer Mick Harford, now the chief recruitment officer, celebrates the Johnstone's Paint Trophy win in 2009 – a bright spot in a dismal period for the club

THE CLUBS WHO DIDN'T COME BACK

Luton exited non-league to climb the leagues once more – these five weren't quite so lucky

CHESTER CITY

Under Mark Wright, Chester City plunged out of League Two in the very same year as Luton Town in 2009 – the other victims of Eddie Howe's Bournemouth team's late escape act. Their previous demotion out of the Football League under Terry Smith had lasted only four years, but this time they immediately went into administration, before being expelled out of the Conference a few months later. Returning in the eighth tier as Chester FC, they will start the new season in National League North.

RUSHDEN & DIAMONDS

Based in the small town of Irthlingborough (population 9,000), the Northamptonshire club were the Forest Green Rovers of their day, belying an unlikely location to climb as far as the third tier in 2003. Three seasons later though, their five-year tenure in the Football League was over and after financial problems, the club dissolved in 2011. A new team called AFC Rushden & Diamonds were relegated last term out of Southern League Premier Division Central, the seventh tier.

SCARBOROUGH

A dramatic last-gasp goal from the goalkeeper Jimmy Glass famously saved Carlisle United from being relegated to the Conference in 1999, consigning Scarborough to non-league instead. Seven years later, the Yorkshire side dropped another division because of financial issues, then went bust and had to start again as Scarborough Athletic in the Northern Counties East League Division One, the 10th tier. Only in 2022 did they finally make it back at least as far as National League North.

TORQUAY UNITED

A Football League club for most of their history, the Gulls are now preparing for a 10th consecutive non-league campaign, after relegation in 2014. They looked all set for an EFL return when they led the National League for much of the 2020-21 season under Gary Johnson, but after losing to Hartlepool United in the play-off final, their form fell away and, despite Johnson's continued presence on the Plainmoor touchline, they slipped to relegation to National League South this year. Poor Helen Chamberlain.

YEOVIL TOWN

Gary Johnson's greatest feat (well, apart from that weird spell managing Latvia) was guiding Yeovil Town all the way from non-league into League One, then returning to take the Glovers as far as the Championship in 2013. But then it all went downhill: two consecutive relegations, another to drop out of the EFL in 2019, then joining Torquay by plunging into National League South. Along with Boston, Darlington, Hereford, Scunthorpe and Maidstone, there will be nine ex-EFL clubs at sixth-tier level this season.

Promotion was secured at the fifth time of asking, as the Hatters bagged 102 goals and 101 points. Still was awarded the honorary freedom of Luton, although it wouldn't save him from the sack, midway through the club's second season back in the Football League, with the team 17th in League Two.

KEEPING UP WITH THE JONESES

Nathan Jones, previously first-team coach at Brighton, was anointed as the man to take the club to the next level – guiding Luton into the play-offs in his first full season, then helping them to automatic promotion a year later. An 8-2 win over Yeovil on the opening day of the 2017-18 season was followed by a 7-1 triumph over Stevenage and a 7-0 thrashing of Cambridge, making them the first team in Football League history to hit seven or more on three separate occasions before they'd even reached Christmas.

The Hatters continued their form into League One and sat in second when Jones controversially left for Stoke in January 2019. As has often been the case over the years, Harford – now the club's chief recruitment officer – became interim boss, leading Luton to the title, before handing over the reins to Roberto Martinez's long-time assistant Graeme Jones.

That didn't go well: Luton were second bottom of the Championship when COVID halted the season, prompting the Hatters to replace Jones with Jones. Out went Graeme and back came Nathan, who'd lasted only 10 months at Stoke. When football got back underway, he worked his magic again, picking up 16 points from the last nine games to guide the club to safety.

"He brought me to the club, and he was fantastic," says midfielder Luke Berry, who joined Luton during Nathan Jones' first spell, and has been a key part of the club's ascent from League Two. "I never believed I'd be a Premier League player before I came to Luton – he gave me that belief and the pointers to improve my game.

"That's what he did when he came back, too. Nathan knew a lot of the group and just believed that we were good enough to stay in the Championship. He gave us confidence and allowed us to play with freedom."

The returning boss helped establish Luton as a Championship side – taking them as far as the play-offs in 2021-22, with a team that often excelled at set pieces, and didn't need to dominate possession to get results. Some feared that semi-final defeat to Huddersfield might have been their one and only chance of the big time, particularly when Jones left again for Southampton before last season had even reached the halfway point.

But the club sat only two points outside the play-off places when Rob Edwards was appointed – fresh from his inevitable sacking by Luton's trigger-happy rivals Watford, he masterminded an incredible run of just one defeat in the last 20 games of the season.

It catapulted them to third in the table, before an aggregate win over Sunderland in the play-off semi-finals. "Rob carried on what Nathan did – he pushes you and tries to make you a better player," explains Berry. "We didn't change a massive amount, but he tweaked things to make us a better team with the ball and without. He improved us and gave us calmness on the ball."







Clockwise from top A triumphant homecoming after the play-off final win; Luton fans taking in the club's rapid rise; the social-media famed away end

Fittingly, they faced Coventry at Wembley – their nearest rivals when they last dropped out of the top flight, back in 1992. Luton's play-off final starting line-up contained Pelly Ruddock Mpanzu in midfield – a player who's been with them since their non-league days, making his debut in a 0-0 draw at Staines in the FA Trophy. After Cov's Gustavo Hamer cancelled out Jordan Clark's opener at the national stadium, Fankaty Dabo's shootout miss sent Luton to the Premier League.

"Myself, Gary Sweet and the board were so emotional," says Harford, thinking back to that moment in May. "It was the end of a magnificent journey and start of another. It's an incredible story, you could make a film or write a book about it. I don't think it will ever happen again. It's not a fluke that we got to the Premier League – we went close last year and have been building."

Soon, the finances earned from their promotion may help them build in another way, too: finally providing the funding for the new stadium they've wanted for decades. Not that they intend for this to be their only campaign in the top flight, to merely pocket the money and run.

"It's an amazing amount of money for one season, but just imagine if they stayed up and got that again," says Oxley. "It's like the ending of *Only Fools and Horses*, where they finally make their money after all the years of struggle. Del Boy walks off into the sunset and says, 'What if we invest it in the futures market? This time next year, we could be billionaires'. Luton have had all these years of struggle and it makes you think about what could be next."

With a capacity of only 10,356, the club's Kenilworth Road home will be the smallest in Premier League history – Bournemouth's Vitality Stadium holds marginally more, at 11,307. Luton's famous away entrance – lodged among a row of terraced houses, before fans climb a staircase over back gardens to reach the away stand itself – has become a meme on social media, but the stadium's rough edges, raucous atmosphere and old-school characteristics could even aid Luton's survival efforts. How many Premier League players will fancy playing there?

"I don't give a s**t what anyone else says – I'm proud of Kenilworth Road," says Harford. Right now, he and everyone associated with Luton Town has every reason to be. It's been a long road back from that summer's day in 2008, when a 20-point deduction put them on course for non-league. In the history of the Premier League, no club's rise to the top flight has been quite so remarkable.



NO GIRLS ALLOWED

HOW SARINA WIEGMAN ROSE TO THE TOP



During childhood, she pretended to be a boy just to play football – now, she's the best female coach in the world. After Euros glory and the Lionesses' first World Cup final, *FFT* uncovers the story behind their greatest-ever gaffer

Words Leo Moynihan **Additional reporting** Mark White

Sarina Wiegman steps out onto the dew-soaked grass. Tracksuit on, stopwatches primed, it's time to go to work. Her players stand, ready; a bag of balls awaits the morning workout. Wiegman has that serious expression she wears every morning, but being so focused, she doesn't notice the faint sniggering from those who call her 'boss'.

Here at Dutch club ADO Den Haag, Wiegman's second as a manager, players have planned a practical joke. Merel van Dongen, a brilliant full-back and future international, has a twin sister. That morning, her non-footballing sibling Sanne has put the training kit on, jogged out in her twin's place and will partake in the session. It's a risky ploy. Wiegman is all about success. Football is serious. Winning titles is serious.

Training begins. Before a ball is kicked, the players start with some core stability work. Wiegman strolls around her players, checking their form. She stops at who she believes is Merel. Something's not right. Merel has done this drill a thousand times before. Why, this morning, is she not doing it correctly?

"Merel, push up those hips," she snarls. "Higher! Higher!" Cue hysterical laughter, but Wiegman is still in the dark. "Why is everyone laughing?" she asks, before refocusing her mind on the job at hand. It's only later, when she spots Sanne running away towards the car park and Merel attempting to join the group by stealth, that the penny finally drops. She has been had.

That morning, Wiegman laughed with her players. She agreed it was the best practical joke they'd ever played, but as her career has progressed, it wouldn't surprise anyone if she admitted that they taught her a valuable lesson. Details. Always look for every detail and don't miss a thing.

That is how Wiegman works – by leaving no stone unturned, she's become the world's female best coach, reaching the final of four consecutive major international tournaments with the Netherlands and England, all while attempting to elevate the women's game into the fastest-growing sport on the planet.

HAIR TODAY, GONE TOMORROW

Since Wiegman first arrived to take charge of the Lionesses back in September 2021, so much has changed. Gone is the inferiority complex that had even the country's most talented footballers looking up at the all-conquering Americans, and the supposedly stronger European teams. After replacing Phil Neville as head coach, Wiegman turned England into European champions last year, then guided them to a first-ever World Cup final this summer.

In between, they beat the USA at Wembley and clinched the Finalissima against Brazil. The inferiority complex was torn from their burdened shoulders. Alongside that new-found sense of confidence, Wiegman and her team have galvanised a nation. Crowds flock to stadiums to watch them – no more







empty seats at international encounters. In August, on the morning of the World Cup final in Sydney, queues of punters – women, girls, men and boys among them – packed the country's pubs.

"We're very proud of her," enthuses Manon Melis, scorer of 59 goals in 136 appearances for the Netherlands national team, and now football co-ordinator for Feyenoord women's team. "Sarina reaching yet another final with England was talked about on all of our sports programmes – the people here are fascinated to see how she's working and coaching the Lionesses. She's such an important figure and hugely respected at home in the Netherlands. Things have happened so fast in our game, and Sarina is a massive part of that. I watch a lot of the Champions League and to see full stadiums, big stadiums like the Emirates... wow! It's super cool to watch."

Ten months after 87,192 people packed out Wembley to see the Lionesses win the Euros, with 17 million watching on television across the UK, there were 60,063 at the Emirates to see Arsenal face Wolfsburg ina Champions League semi-final – a record for a women's club fixture on English soil.

When Wiegman was growing up in The Hague in the 1970s, the idea of full grounds in the women's game was mere fantasy. For her, aged just seven, the aim was purely to be allowed to play with older brother Tom. 'No girls allowed' was the message, designed to distract her and lead her eye to some other hobby. Instead, with her family's support, it made her even more determined. With her parents' approval, her blonde locks were cut short and she played on, albeit incognito – it was just the start.





> "SARINA REPLACED A BIG NAME BUT SHE WAS HIRED TO TAKE THE TEAM TO ANOTHER LEVEL"

Wiegman didn't only play against the boys, she would constantly infuriate them too. On finding out her true gender, complaints were made to referees – goals were even chalked off because they'd been scored by a girl. No matter, she simply persevered, getting better and getting stronger, using any disapproving glance or utterance against her as fuel to advance further into a place within the sport that she so loved.



Opportunities came at youth level and then at Kruikelientjes Football Club 1971, more commonly known as KFC '71, a women's team from nearby Delft who won the KNVB Cup in 1987 with Wiegman in their line-up. A midfielder who later moved into defence, she'd made her debut for the Dutch national team that season, aged 17 – a year later, she travelled to China to take part in the FIFA Women's Invitation Tournament, a test event ahead of the launch of the Women's World Cup in 1991. Her impressive performances in China led to another invitation – to study at the University of North Carolina and play for the North Carolina Tar Heels.

Wiegman spent 1989 there. It was a move that brought success and real insight. Arriving in the United States and seeing the already flourished state of the game, Wiegman, like Dorothy stepping from her windswept home into devastating technicolour, soon realised that so much more was possible to achieve. The women's game need not be played out in black and white.

Anti-clockwise from top left Early days with ADO Den Haag; preparing her Dutch squad for the Euro 2017 Final; glory on home soil; she then defended the trophy as Lionesses boss

"Football paradise" was how she later called her new home. Her skills on the pitch, coupled with her football intelligence meant she more than fitted in alongside club-mates that included future global greats such as Kristine Lilly and Mia Hamm. Away from their title-winning matchdays, the quality of the facilities in which they operated, the lack of timidity about women's place in the game and the financial support offered to players were all a world away from the stagnation of the sport on the other side of the Atlantic.

"It changed my life," she later explained to *Coaches' Voice*. "It changed my mindset. I still use some of the things I learned that year, in terms of how to get the best out of others and myself. But the biggest thing I took away was the determination that what I experienced in the States, I wanted in the Netherlands, too."

More than 30 years later, upon accepting the England job, Wiegman could see that when it came to facilities and determination, there was not a problem. St George's Park and a fire lit under the women's game had seen to that. What that fire now needed was a lot more petrol. What the players needed was more guidance.

Under her predecessor, Phil Neville, England had caught the eye but not quite reached their full potential. Tactically, there had to be improvements. "Phil admitted himself that he's not the best coach with the best tactics," full-back Lucy Bronze said in 2019. "But he really wanted to create relationships with the players, fans and staff, and he's done that." Wiegman was replacing a big name in the men's game, but the truth was she was hired to take the team to another level.

FOLLOW TER LEEDE

When Wiegman returned from playing in the US, she did so with an even greater work ethic, born from those possibilities she had seen. Back in the Netherlands, she won titles and the cup with Ter Leede, driving the team on as captain. "Play forward," she'd instruct her team-mates. It was a style of play that earned her 99 caps – she previously thought it was 104, being presented with a shield by ▸

Louis van Gaal after becoming the first Dutch player to reach 100 appearances in 2001, only for it later to be ruled that five of those matches were unofficial because they were against opponents not affiliated with FIFA.

Wiegman also captained her country before retiring in 2003 when she became pregnant with her second child – she was already combining raising a family with her day job as a PE teacher at a secondary school. Three years on though, she became coach of Ter Leede, guiding them to the double in 2007.

A year later, she was offered a part-time role to manage ADO Den Haag in the new Women's Eredivisie, in which Ter Leede would not be involved. But part-time wouldn't do. It was a full-time job and that was the only way she would do it. There, she built up not only the team – winning the Eredivisie and the KNVB Cup in 2012 – but also the notion of women's football. Equality in the now-professional game was just as much a target as securing silverware.

"Sarina worked so hard for the women's game," reflects Manon Melis, then a Dutch international. "She was very well known due to her playing career, and it was clear that she desperately wanted the best for our sport – it was important. She now has the facilities she needs, and that's brilliant. She fought for that. Fifteen years ago, all of that wasn't there. She was such a forward thinker too, using things like video analysis at club level. By fighting for those tools, she made the women's game much stronger."

That desire to evolve led Wiegman to the Dutch national team in 2014 – she became the assistant coach, while also taking charge of the under-19s. In 2016, she gained media attention with a stint aiding the men's side at Sparta Rotterdam, where she'd previously spent time as part of the coaching course to gain her UEFA Pro Licence. Once the national team job came up months later, she grabbed it. Now all she had seen, desired and learned had a global platform.

One of the very first things Wiegman did as Netherlands coach was to give the squad a list, entitled '13 things you should give up if you want to succeed'. One of the pieces of advice was quite simple: 'Give up the need to be liked'. It was an indication of the win-at-all-costs mentality that would go on to be so successful. Some people may have seen it as a gimmick, another tagline taped to the dressing room wall, but Wiegman meant it. Just ask her captain, Mandy van den Berg.

"Oh my god," continues Melis. "When she dropped Van den Berg from the team midway through the Euros in 2017, that was a really huge decision. Wow! It proved that she's not afraid to make the big decisions, and all that is important is the team. What does the team need? What will make them better? You need to be brave, and she is."

Former England skipper Steph Houghton learned that sentiment isn't especially high on Wiegman's list of priorities. Despite hopes of a recall for this summer's World Cup, the Manchester City defender was left out of the Lionesses' squad after returning from injury.







Clockwise from top left As Dutch No.2 in 2015; Wiegman followed up Euros success by reaching the 2019 World Cup Final; the Lionesses have rarely stopped roaring since Sarina arrived as manager

FEMALE EMPOWERMENT

Like Wiegman, these three women have also claimed major honours as managers in recent years

JILL ELLIS

Born in Folkstone, Ellis moved across the pond as a teenager before taking up coaching and eventually becoming USA manager by 2014. Within a year she'd won the World Cup, then did it again in 2019. She's now president of San Diego Wave, who have Casey Stoney as boss.



SONIA BOMPASTOR

No female head coach had won the Women's Champions League for a dozen seasons when Bompastor took over as Lyon boss in 2021 – she needed only 12 months to guide the French side to the crown last term, thanks to a 3-1 win over Barcelona in the final.



EMMA HAYES

The Chelsea supremo is the most successful coach in WSL history – Arsenal's Laura Harvey and Liverpool's Matt Beard have won it twice, but Hayes has bagged the title six times, even adding the 2017 Spring Series for good measure. This campaign, she's going for five in a row.



Wiegman is ready to be ruthless if needed, but that's not to say she doesn't bring a sense of fun to her squads when the time is right. During the Netherlands' Euro 2017 campaign, Wiegman devised five-a-side tournaments at the end of training sessions. They became very competitive, which was Wiegman's aim all along, of course. Such was the rigour put in by the players that, after a victory, they expected a prize befitting their efforts. What they received instead was one of Wiegman's bras. A symbolic gesture? "I introduce a bra because the support a bra gives symbolises the support we will get from our supporters," she informed her slightly bemused but clearly responsive squad.

Wiegman's side went on to win those Euros on home soil, then backed it up by reaching a first-ever World Cup final shortly afterwards, where the Netherlands were defeated by the USA. Sound familiar?

A PENCIL BY THE BED

Wiegman was expected to be in charge of the Dutch at the following Euros in England, too, had the pandemic not delayed the tournament until 2022. Instead, the expiry of her contract in the summer of 2021 left her free to take charge of the Lionesses and guide them to glory less than a year later. It's unknown if lists and bras greeted the England squad when she initially took over, but there was immediate clarity.

"What's obvious very quickly with Sarina is what she expects from her players and her staff," says Melis. "The rules in the team are very clear, and she's really easy to reach out to. You can talk to her so easily – she's great at communicating and as a coach that has to be key. Also, she's always listening."

That clarity of thought is also accompanied by a directness, so often attributed to the Dutch. "That's true," chuckles Melis. "Actually, where Sarina and I are from in the west of the Netherlands, it's especially true. We say what we think and are super clear. With Sarina, she says exactly what she expects."

On their way to Euros success, tactically things couldn't have been clearer for England. "She was consistent, sticking with the same team and same shape, and making changes at the same time," explains former Lionesses star Sue Smith, who lined up for her country 93 times between 1997 and 2012. "Even the wording was good – she'd insist, 'You're not a substitute, you're a finisher'. I love it. You're just as important as the starting line-up and you're going to win the game for us. When you see them celebrating victories, you don't see the ones who were on the bench thinking, 'Well, I didn't get to play'. That's massive. She developed that culture."

Wiegman was more than happy to let the players enjoy their glory last year. "When you have this accomplishment, it's good to have a party," she said, as the squad celebrated at a public event in Trafalgar Square. Those who know her, though, will tell you that Wiegman was already looking ahead to the World Cup. "I have the pencil by the bed," she once said. Think, think, think. From the young girl cutting her hair just to get a game, to taking a team all the way through a major tournament to victory, Wiegman's mind has always purred.



Above England savour their 3-1 victory over hosts Australia in the World Cup semis

> "I CAN'T PRAISE HER ENOUGH. FOR ENGLAND, SHE'S CHANGED THE MINDSET AND MENTALITY"

En route to the World Cup, the occasional rock in the road – a friendly loss to Australia that ended England's 30-game unbeaten run under Wiegman, a flat draw with Portugal, coupled with injuries to Beth Mead, Fran Kirby and Leah Williamson – was met with a calm thought process. Tactics were tweaked. The manager's preferred 4-3-3 was turned into a 4-2-3-1, while three at the back was looked at and then used in the tournament.

"Changing to a back three was something that she had to do, because of the personnel available, and it worked," reflects Smith. "We went into the World Cup with lots of injuries to key players, yet never once did I hear her complain or use it as an excuse. She's always super positive and that filters down to all the players. If you heard Sarina say, 'It's going to be tough,' the players would believe it. Never once did I hear her say that."

Rachel Daly – the WSL's leading scorer in 2022-23 – was tried at wing-back to cover those unable to travel. An already successful team was becoming more adaptable and versatile. Think, think, think. It was the same off the pitch, too. At St George's Park, plans were quickly afoot. Details matter, remember. A chrono coach specialising in recovery from jet lag was brought in, light-filtering glasses were trialled to help with sleep patterns and then, prior to departure Down Under, those patterns were adapted to suit the time zones in Australia and New Zealand.

Attention to detail, clarity of thought and tactics, personable relationships and a desire to win the lot. After more heartbreak in the World Cup final – Spain edging England 1-0 – the latter still needs some work, but aged 53, Wiegman's career is still rising.

"I can't praise Sarina enough for what she's done for England," declares Smith. "It's been changing a mindset and a mentality, creating an environment that the players thrive in, and to do that so quickly is difficult. She did it with the Netherlands, she came to us and whenever you speak to the players, they just speak so highly of her. Not only tactically and how she's improving them as players, but what she does off the field. She treats them all like people."

It has helped Wiegman to win 30 and lose only two of her 39 matches in charge of the Lionesses. Given such consistency, both with England and the Dutch national team before that, it's difficult to argue that she's the best female coach on the planet. Defeated at the World Cup by Spain's controversial male boss Jorge Vilda, she beat him to UEFA's Coach of the Year award in any case, claiming the prize for a second successive year.

Despite her England contract running until Euro 2025, it's probably no shock that she's been linked in recent times with both the USA position and even a role managing the Dutch men's team. "Everyone in the Netherlands is talking about what she does after England, and whether she'll manage a men's side one day, but she will decide," says Manon Melis. "She will have choices, and she's earned the right to choose."

Wiegman is indeed in control of her own destiny. These days, she could be forgiven for allowing her mind to wander back to her childhood, when she had to cut her hair and pretend to be a boy in order to be involved in the game at all. No girls allowed.

Few people have played a bigger part in the progression of women's football since then. Whatever is to follow next, Sarina Wiegman has had the last laugh.

SCANDINAVIAN ICONS





Before Martin Ødegaard and Erling Haaland arrived to rip up the Premier League, a host of other Nordic stars had already made their mark on the world stage – these 16 standouts among them

Words Nick Moore, Si Hawkins, Richard Edwards

MICHAEL AND BRIAN LAUDRUP
DENMARK

With due respect to the De Boers, Hazards and, er, Nevilles, there has never been a more talented pair of footballing brethren than the Laudrups. Michael is arguably the greatest Danish player of all time. The attacking midfielder picked up silverware at Ajax, Barcelona, Real Madrid and Juventus. He was an integral cog in Johan Cruyff's Barcelona 'Dream Team', pocketing four La Ligas and the 1992 European Cup. He then crossed the divide to the Bernabeu but somehow remains a legend at both clubs.

Best of all, he did it in style. It's hard to recall a more elegant playmaker: fiercely intelligent, full of feints and blind passes, an assist machine. Italian defender Roberto Galia noted, "I've played against Maradona, Platini and Baggio, but the player I saw do the most indescribable things was Michael."

That might be intimidating for a younger brother, but this was a family made of stern stuff. Brian, four years junior, coasted out of his sibling's shadow – Michael declared he believed Brian to be the better player – but they were both world-class and worshipped.

Brian had abundant technical ability, pace, intelligence and a similar insatiable appetite for assists. He won the Danish Player of the Year award on four occasions (twice as many as Michael), and starred at Bayern Munich, Fiorentina and Rangers, where he scored 44 goals. Danish dynamite indeed.

CAREER HIGHLIGHT The pair never played together at club level, but joined forces for Denmark. Though Michael opted to go on holiday rather than attend Euro 92 (he had to watch his kid brother come home holding the silverware), the duo did collaborate to win the 1995 Confederations Cup, with Brian up front and Michael in midfield.

WEIRDEST MOMENT Michael's rollercoaster stint as manager of Swansea, who he led to the top half of the Premier League and 2013 League Cup Final glory, before being sacked for a supposedly 'laissez faire' attitude to their subsequent poor run.

JOHN ARNE RIISE
NORWAY

The left-back collected a record 110 caps for Norway and became a Liverpool hero during seven seasons at Anfield, after joining from Monaco in 2001. Part of the team that pulled off the fabled Miracle of Istanbul against Milan in 2005 (though he missed a penalty during the shootout), he was the king of the thunderbastard, famously beating Fabien Barthez with one hypersonic strike against Manchester United. In another game against the Red Devils, his shot was so powerful that it dislocated Alan Smith's ankle.

He also scored the fastest goal in League Cup final history, after 45 seconds against Chelsea in Cardiff.

WEIRDEST MOMENT Being on the receiving end of a golf club swung by Craig Bellamy, during a late-night incident in the Algarve.

HANNA LJUNGBERG
SWEDEN

Who's heard of the Swedish city of Umea? If you have, it's probably because of Hanna Ljungberg (no relation to Freddie), the spearhead of Umea IK, a women's football powerhouse in the 2000s: claiming more cups than IKEA's downstairs homeware bit.

Ljungberg helped them become European champions twice – she almost won the 2003 World Cup too, scoring the opener in the final before Germany roared back. 'Skam!', as they say in Umea (that means 'Shame', we're not accusing anyone of match-fixing).

WEIRDEST MOMENT Perugia attempted to sign Ljungberg in 2003 for their men's team. The Serie A upstarts also recruited Colonel Gaddafi's son, but the deal for Ljungberg fell through, they got relegated and haven't been back in the top flight since. ▶







"MICHAEL'S RECORD WAS INTIMIDATING, BUT BRIAN COASTED OUT OF HIS OLDER SIBLING'S SHADOW"

ADA HEGERBERG
NORWAY

The 2020s have been frustratingly stop-start for the Norwegian super-striker, so far. Just back from a six-month injury lay-off after two years out with cruciate complications – plus a five-year absence from the Norway national team – it's almost as if she's trying to let the mere mortals catch up. Lyon's taliswoman is like that too-good kid who has to be moved up an age group to keep things competitive: it's not fair otherwise.

Actually, Hegerberg did exactly that as a teenager, except she moved straight into first-team football. Already a fixture for her first club Kolbotn at 15, she scored her first hat-trick at 16 and finished that season as top scorer. In 2012 she even bagged five in the first half, against Fart. Blew them away.

The prodigious striker – and younger sister of Andrine, a midfielder – then switched to Germany's Turbine Potsdam. But Ada really took off in France, netting 15 in the 2017-18 Champions League (still a record) during Lyon's treble campaign and winning the first-ever Women's Ballon d'Or (see below).

Hegerberg had already made a dramatic stand against inequality months earlier, refusing to play for Norway until the culture changed, and she isn't universally loved back home. That self-imposed exile ended last year, with a hat-trick against Kosovo.

Injuries remain a serious concern, but at 27 Hegerberg is already the Women's Champions League's all-time top scorer with 59 goals – despite hardly playing for three years. Is the hundred plausible? Whatever happens next, she's got to be in the GOAT race.

CAREER HIGHLIGHT A 16-minute hat-trick in the 2019 Women's Champions League Final takes some topping. Perhaps even sweeter was her goal in last year's showpiece, also against Barcelona, after two years out. She's a goalscoring machine who rarely seems rusty.

WEIRDEST MOMENT The worst booking of Hegerberg's career? Whoever hired DJ Martin Solveig to co-host the Ballon d'Or ceremony in 2018. The Lyon phenom won the inaugural women's award, before Solveig asked if she twerked, which went down badly. Would he ask Luka Modric to pole dance? Probably not.

"LYON'S TALISWOMAN IS LIKE THAT KID WHO HAS TO BE MOVED UP AN AGE GROUP TO KEEP IT FAIR"



PETER SCHMEICHEL
DENMARK

Imagine trying to defend in front of Peter Schmeichel – no matter how wonderful your career, you'd still feel like one of those shaky greasy-spoon chefs struggling to make an egg bap for Gordon Ramsay. The tough love worked though: purple-faced Pete is definitely the top Nordic No.1 and a decent shout for greatest goalkeeper ever, given Denmark's unexpected success at Euro 92, various domestic titles and the 1999 Champions League. You don't get that sort of simmering fury from modern keepers.

WEIRDEST MOMENT Such a consistently reliable decision-maker, until he departed Manchester United. For some, Schmeichel's season at Manchester City partly tarnished eight glorious years at Old Trafford, but more worrying was his promotional work for Russia 2018 and Qatar 2022. Sometimes keepers just shouldn't venture out.

TOMAS BROLIN
SWEDEN

If there was ever a meeting of manager and player doomed to fail, it was when maverick Swedish genius Brolin signed for no-nonsense Leeds taskmaster Howard Wilkinson. Brolin was a wildly talented playmaker, delightful at Parma in his early 20s and sensational for his country. However, his transfer to Elland Road derailed him.

Sergeant Wilko thought he was lazy and often played him out of position: the Swede decided to self-sabotage. "Run up and down like an idiot? That wasn't me. So I decided I was going to be piss-poor." He ended up battling weight issues and retiring aged 29.

CAREER HIGHLIGHT Brolin won 47 Sweden caps, scoring 26 goals, and his displays at Euro 92 in his homeland were mesmeric. He smashed a top-corner cracker past Chris Woods to eliminate Graham Taylor's England.





ZLATAN IBRAHIMOVIC
SWEDEN

Where to start with a man who is a legend, who is famous enough to only need one name (trademarked, other Zlatans!), who speaks five languages and is a black belt in taekwondo, who has his own range of computer games and cosmetics, and who is surely the greatest Swede to ever live?

With the football, we guess: since his debut for Malmo in 1999, Zlatan has been relentless. He's racked up more than 850 games, scored over 500 goals for Ajax, Juve, Inter, Barça, Milan, Man United, PSG and LA Galaxy, and become his country's all-time top hitman. His physical assets are clear – 6ft 5in tall, quick, agile and with a fighter's physique. Twinned with a sublime tactical brain, technical excellence, versatility, an appetite for hard work and street cunning, it has produced a near-perfect footballer.

Equally as important to his iconic status, though, are the looks, swagger and wit. Not since Eric Cantona has there been an enigmatic glare to match Zlatan's, nor such a fierce insouciance towards reputations (to Pep Guardiola: "You haven't got any balls"). There's even a likeability about his third person-referencing (signing off at Galaxy with "you wanted Zlatan, I gave you Zlatan... now go back to watching baseball").

Perhaps being funny saves him from the opprobrium that fellow self-worshipper CR7 receives – but Zlatan is one of the few who can match such talk with the walk, too.

CAREER HIGHLIGHT Becoming Sweden's leading scorer? That goal against England? Everyone will have their own peak Zlatan moment, but his 2014-15 season for PSG – 50 goals in 51 games – is frankly insane.

WEIRDEST MOMENT The launch of *Zlatan Pour Homme* aftershave. *FFT*'s perfume reviewer dismissed it as "like watermelon, disappointing, a sheep in wolf's clothing".



PERNILLE HARDER
DENMARK

The most expensive player in the women's game, before Keira Walsh joined Barcelona in September. Chelsea signed the Dane from Wolfsburg for £250,000 three years ago and Harder has since clinched the WSL twice, plus *FFT*'s global poll to determine who would have claimed the 2020 Women's Ballon d'Or, had it not been cancelled because of COVID.

With 70 international goals, the 30-year-old midfielder is Denmark's all-time leading scorer and has YouTube to thank for the inspiration. "It was difficult to find women's football on TV, so I watched clips of Marta," she said. Only Alexia Putellas can match her two UEFA Player of the Year awards.

CAREER HIGHLIGHT Captaining Denmark to qualification for the 2023 World Cup – their first trip to the tournament since 2007.

THORBJORN SVENSSEN
NORWAY

In 1961, the central defender became just the second player in history to reach 100 international games, after England's Billy Wright, who achieved the feat two years earlier. Nicknamed 'Klippen' (The Rock), Svenssen spent his career at Sandefjord between 1945 and 1964 and was widely admired. "During the 1950s, he was one of Europe's best centre-halves," said Per Ravn Omdal, ex-president of the Norwegian FA.

Having also represented Norway at the 1952 Olympics, he finished with 104 caps, one short of Wright, playing his last match aged 38. Only three men, Ronny Johnsen among them, have appeared for Norway at a more advanced age.

CAREER HIGHLIGHT Skippering Norway for the first time at 24, he ended up captaining his country an incredible 93 times. ▶

OLE GUNNAR SOLSKJAER
NORWAY

"SOLSKJAER!" It's one of those surnames you can only ever hear in one particular accent – that of climaxing Clive Tyldesley – even after a 17-year playing career and then another decade in management. That's the thing about scoring injury-time winners in Champions League finals: people tend to forget about everything else you've done.

The elfin Norwegian did some good stuff back home first – helping Clausenengen and Molde to new heights – then hit 126 goals for Manchester United, top-scoring with 18 in his first season. Other highlights: crucial strikes against Liverpool, Villa and Leeds, four versus Forest and Everton, and a cynical match-saving professional foul to thwart Newcastle, taking a red for the team. The baby-faced assassin didn't just score goals.

Still, he usually played second fiddle to the first choices – Eric Cantona, Dwight Yorke, Andy/Andrew Cole, Ruud van Nistelrooy – and seemed perennially set for a move to Spurs. United accepted offers, he chose to stay. Which makes sense: simply count the medals. He was crucial for Norway though, forming a classic little-and-large double act with Tore Andre Flo; a sort of Stan and Ole.

Solskjaer was a Premier League pioneer, in a way. At Old Trafford, he kicked off like your classic start-hungry supersub, but settled into life leading the new breed of rotation-happy squad bodies; an original Origi, or proto-Chicharito. Modern teams may collect players like Panini stickers but they actually want feel-good pros like him, warming the bench emotionally too.

CAREER HIGHLIGHT A trickier selection than you might think – winning that big final is up there for sure, but for sheer Solskjaerian magic, it's Nottingham Forest's City Ground earlier in 1999. United were already 4-1 up when Ole entered, stage left. "Just keep the ball," said coach Jim Ryan; he scored four in 14 minutes. The new Norwegian sensation might have tapped in five against RB Leipzig recently, but he had a whole hour to do that, the absolute lightweight.

WEIRDEST MOMENT Things only really went awry when Ole became manager. It started awkwardly – stuck in a hotel because he'd rented his Cheshire pad to Liverpool defender Virgil van Dijk – and the strain eventually told. Amid one painful run in 2021, he reckoned the players were confused by the red banners around Old Trafford. Back to Clive Tyldesley: "And Solskjaer has lost it..."





PIA SUNDHAGE
SWEDEN

The Swede is a Yoda-like figure in women's football, after amassing a then-record 146 appearances for her country between 1975 and 1996. Sundhage made her national team debut as a 15-year-old prodigy, going on to register a joint-record 71 goals and appear on a Swedish postage stamp.

The former forward has since had success as a manager – guiding the USA to Olympic gold in 2008 and 2012, delivering silver for Sweden in 2016 and then winning the Copa America Femenina with Brazil last summer.

CAREER HIGHLIGHT Sundhage was both the best player and leading scorer at Euro 84, netting in both legs of the semi-final against Italy. After scoring one more against England in Gothenburg, she converted the winning spot-kick in the second leg, in a shootout at Luton's Kenilworth Road.

ALLAN SIMONSEN
DENMARK

Did you know that Diego Maradona caused Charlton Athletic's '80s downfall? When he joined Barcelona in 1982, it squeezed out Allan Simonsen, who went to Charlton. One problem: the Addicks shelled out £300,000, but were in the Second Division and couldn't afford him. Cue years of financial strife and a move away from The Valley.

What a signing, though. The prolific Dane had thrust Borussia Moenchengladbach to three league titles, two UEFA Cups and the 1977 European Cup Final: Liverpool won but Simonsen scored a corker and beat Kevin Keegan to the Ballon d'Or.

CAREER HIGHLIGHT That European Cup thump. Trailing to Terry McDermott's opener, Simonsen seized on a loose pass, reached the corner of the box, considered his options and decided to smash it past Ray Clemence.



“LARSSON WOULD JUST DISAPPEAR. YOU’D SWEAR HE’D VANISHED INTO THIN AIR – HE WAS INVISIBLE”

HENRIK LARSSON
SWEDEN

For Celtic supporters, Larsson is still the ‘king of kings’. For opposition defenders, he was a ghost. “Larsson would disappear,” recalled Motherwell stopper Stephen Craigan about trying to tackle him. “You’d swear that he’d vanished into thin air – he was invisible.”

The Swede was the complete forward: fast, tough, brilliant in the air, explosive and a lethal finisher. Most of all, he was evasive, with an uncoachable instinct for drifting into space and slipping his man.

Some might argue that spending seven campaigns in Scottish domestic football, bamboozling the full-backs of Motherwell and beyond, was far too long for a player of his international pedigree. But at that time, the Hoops were flying high in Europe, Larsson loved Glasgow and his family was settled. “We had something very good going on with Martin O’Neill,” he said. “I was really happy at Celtic and knew I was important there. There was no reason to go.”

Half of Glasgow loved him back. Larsson helped to foil Rangers’ bid for the elusive 10 in a row, and the goals kept flowing: he would end up on 242 goals from 313 games. He got his shot at the big time after leaving Celtic, with two seasons at Barcelona. The first was curtailed by an ACL injury, but the second was magical – especially in the Champions League final against Arsenal, where he broke north London hearts by assisting both goals. A spell with Manchester United, some fine play internationally and a middling management career followed – but nothing would top his time in Scotland.

CAREER HIGHLIGHT The 2006 Champions League Final, where Larsson was the ultimate impact sub. “People talk about Ronaldinho and Eto’o, but I didn’t see them today, I saw Henrik Larsson,” said Thierry Henry. “He came on, he changed the game.”

WEIRDEST MOMENT It’s probably not weird to floorball fans (is there a magazine called *FloorFloorTwo*?), but Larsson was competitive in the hockey-style game as a kid, and after retiring from football, took up the sport again for his hometown club, Helsingborg.



HEGE RIISE
NORWAY

Norway’s women’s coach is an iconic figure in her homeland – and one of the greatest female footballers in history. Riise won the Euros in 1993, the World Cup in 1995 and then Olympic gold in 2000 – a hat-trick of titles achieved by just two other women.

A set-piece queen, Riise was invited by Even Pellerud, her 1995 World Cup-winning coach, to train with Norwegian top-flight club Lillestrom when he moved back into men’s football. “It was to show the players how to take good free kicks,” explained Per-Mathias Hogmo. After a spell as USA assistant coach, Riise became England’s interim boss when Phil Neville departed in 2021, taking charge for the Tokyo Olympics.

CAREER HIGHLIGHT Scoring five goals at the 1995 World Cup in Sweden, to win the Golden Ball as the tournament’s best player.

THOMAS GRAVESEN
DENMARK

He’s principally remembered as a demented Danish wrecking ball – the midfield “Mad Dog” who knocked out Brazilian Ronaldo’s teeth, even though they were on the same team – but Gravesen could also play a bit.

He earned a switch to Real Madrid (Fabio Capello said, “He’s just a bit peculiar… I don’t mess with him”) and won 66 international caps. On English shores, though, he’ll forever be a Goodison Park legend where, as the alpha pup for David Moyes’ ‘Dogs of War’, the Toffees were notoriously robust opponents.

WEIRDEST MOMENT Take your pick: being caught on camera dangling his genitals over the head of Claus Jensen during Denmark training, or nearly hitting Everton’s physio with a firework he’d let off. Such a japester…



RECRUITMENT, RECRU

As Brighton begin their first ever European campaign, having unearthed gem after gem in the transfer market, *F*

Words Chris Evans



ITMENT, RECRUITMENT

FT speaks to key figures inside the club to discover their secret – from algorithms to clandestine spreadsheets...



A sense of bemusement crept into the room as Paul Barber addressed Brighton & Hove Albion's 300-strong workforce. The Seagulls' chief executive had gathered his staff together to lay out his and owner Tony Bloom's vision for the future on the south coast, and it wasn't being met with universal agreement.

Albion had just completed their first season back in the Championship, finishing a credible 10th in 2012, their highest league position in more than 20 years. But Barber wasn't in any mood for backslapping and talk of consolidation. Instead, he was discussing what needed to be done for them to become an established Premier League side.

It was a display of ambition that inspired some of the assembled group, although the headshaking and facial expressions among the cynics in the room suggested some felt the aim was a mere flight of fancy. Eleven years on, it has proved to be anything but.

Now, the Seagulls are embarking upon their seventh successive Premier League campaign and preparing for their first ever experience of European football. Last term's sixth-placed finish was the highest in the club's history, earning them a spot in the group stage of the Europa League.

This has been no overnight success story. As Barber's speech in 2012 showed, Brighton have been attempting to break new ground for more than a decade.

"It's something the club has been aspiring to for a very long time," Barber explains to *FourFourTwo*. "The first task was to set that vision for everybody; to communicate it and make it real for people, to make them feel as though it was a possibility and a likelihood. That meant looking at every area of the club in a lot of detail and trying to be Premier League-ready, way before we were anywhere near the Premier League."

What makes Brighton's ascent even more impressive is that it hasn't been achieved by simply splashing the cash. It has all been down to foresight. Back in the Championship, they prioritised the back office: implementing the most efficient ticketing systems, making sure that internal teams and facilities would be up to scratch for the big league. Today, the focus is on a succession plan for all key playing and non-playing staff, funnelling a seemingly endless conveyor belt of talent into the first team.

"It's about being prepared well before we need to be – I'm convinced that preparation before we got promoted was absolutely vital in giving us the best chance of staying up in the first season or two," continues Barber. "We've been doing very similar things over the past 12 or 24 months, looking at whether we're ready to play in Europe and what we need to improve, not just on the field but off it, too. The whole club is fully concentrated on continuous improvement.

"European football presents a different test: the different volume of matches, the travel, and the Thursday-Sunday routine that has proved challenging for bigger clubs than us, who have played in Europe numerous times before. But it's all part of the evolution of the club – we've got to be ready."

THE SEAGULLS GO GLOBAL

The secret sauce is Bloom's algorithm, which identifies personnel from around the globe who fit the needs of Brighton's machine. The modelling is so widely coveted that the vast majority of the club's own staff don't have a working knowledge of it, nor access to the clandestine spreadsheet that lists the desired replacements for key individuals.

Bloom is a stellar mathematician, and his philosophy follows the same formula that earned him his fortune as a professional gambler: picking out previously undervalued metrics which reveal the crucial ingredients that make clubs – and particular players or coaches – successful. That means Brighton's recruitment team can spot emerging talent earlier than most of their rivals. Sometimes it leads them to markets very few know at all.

The numbers don't dictate signings; rather, they point the Seagulls in the right direction, so they can take a closer look at players who fit the right profile. Getting eyes on prospects is as important as it's ever been, but the data helps to refine those player safaris so that scouting missions to far-flung locations are more likely to bear fruit.

"A lot of work goes into that process of looking at players all over the world," says Barber. "There are different leads, different clubs and different levels. The more data there is when it comes to recruiting that player or coach, the better, but there are certain markets around the world where the data is thinner than others. The data will be thinner in places where, for example, players have a longer education or don't feature in as many league games. When we're looking at players from those areas, we combine our research to make sure we've got plenty of eyes on scouting and character referencing, to build up a picture as best we can."

A list of the club's acquistions in recent years shows the diversity of the talent pools they're exploring. Alexis Mac Allister arrived directly from Argentina, Moises Caicedo from Ecuador, Kaoru Mitoma from Japan and Julio Enciso from Paraguay, while other gems were plucked from various less vaunted European leagues. It has resulted in a perception that wherever on Earth you go, you're never more than a few miles away from a Brighton scout.

"WE TRY TO GET THE PLAYERS IN BEFORE WE NEED THEM, NOT AFTER WE'VE SOLD SOMEBODY"



Clockwise from below Bloom has played his hand – and Albion fans are all-in; hidden treasures Mitoma and Ferguson; Weir (right) has a key role; Enciso – this year's star?









"The world is a huge place – people think we've got a massive resource and people on the ground all over the planet, but that's not necessarily the case," insists David Weir. The ex-Everton, Rangers and Scotland defender was hired as Brighton's technical director last year, having previously worked as Mark Warburton's No.2 at similarly recruitment-orientated Brentford, before switching to the Seagulls in 2019.

"We have a small, efficient department and the club, in general, know what types of player we like: youngsters who can become what we want them to be. It's definitely a strength to have a way of working and a streamlining tool that enables you to fish in a smaller pond, but it [Bloom's algorithm] also allows us to act early, get on the ground and get things moving quickly."

That approach means that the need isn't as great for regional scouts, as other clubs may employ, with Brighton's scouting team divided by position rather than geographical location – a striker expert runs the rule over potential No.9s, for example.

The ability to mine unheralded gems means Albion have been able to build a stable of talent that is ready to step up whenever the opportunity arises.

"We try to have those players through our door before we need them," says Barber. "In an ideal world, you don't want to be targeting a particular player right after you've sold one in his position, because everybody knows you've got money, and that you're going to be a little bit keener to sign that player than if you've already got someone in that position in your building."

COMPETING WITH THE BIG BOYS

Having a plethora of youngsters on the books provides a different sort of challenge – one to which Brighton have been adapting as their resources allow them to bring in a greater number of players. Only a handful will feature in the Premier League immediately, while others might never make the grade, but the continuing success of the system relies on each new recruit feeling as though there is still a benefit in moving to Sussex.

To boost that development, Brighton lean on the loan market to give their tyros the playing time they need. The club try to match a destination with that individual's specific skillset so they get the maximum from their experience, and they use global marketplace TransferRoom and its Plus Pitch tool to do so.

"It's a way and means of talking to a lot of different clubs very quickly, making them aware of a situation that might have popped up short-term, or a longer-term solution that you're looking for further down the line," adds Weir, who previously worked as the Seagulls' loan manager. "It's helpful, although it isn't everything. We use it in combination with Gordon Greer, our pathway manager, who makes countless calls, talks to many people, and has vast experience in finding clubs that will work for different players."

It's working. Ben White's loans at Newport, Peterborough and Leeds helped to turn him into a player that Brighton sold to Arsenal for £50 million after a single season in their first team. Mac Allister returned to Argentina for spells with old club Argentinos Juniors, then Boca, where he even made his international debut. Caicedo adapted to European football during a loan at Belgian club Beerschot and Mitoma also headed to Belgium with Union Saint-Gilloise, the other club part-owned by Bloom. Simon Adingra, a virtuoso Ivorian winger, followed the same path last season.

Brighton's reputation for providing a route to the first team has transformed them into a club that starlets from all around the globe aspire to join. The best endorsement came in 2021 when Irish forward Evan Ferguson decided to sign for Albion from Bohemians, despite reported interest from Manchester United, the team he loved as a boy. Still only 18, Ferguson hit 10 goals in all competitions for Brighton last term.

"Part of our big secret is the environment we're bringing them into: we have coaches, managers and technical staff who want to give people chances," reveals Weir. "A player can be as talented or promising as they want, but if they don't get an opportunity to express that and develop, it's hard. With us, it's not 'in for a game and out for a game': it's actually an opportunity to come into the building and ▶







Above Signed from Watford in May 2023 for a club-record fee of £30m, Joao Pedro has netted twice in eight appearances **Left** Once hailed as the heir to Messi, Ansu Fati shunned several European clubs to join the Seagulls on a season-long loan **Right** Plucked from the Danish Superliga, Simon Adingra is proving to be yet another gem uncovered by Brighton's excellent recruitment

work with very good coaches day-to-day on the training pitch, then get the opportunity to shine on a Saturday.

"History tells us that we do give chances to young players; we play them in the Premier League; we develop and improve them with our expertise and club culture. However, it's also clear that when the time is right and it works for everyone, they can move on to the next level of elite club. People try to take a lot of credence from what we've done."

"TODD BOEHLY CALLED... AGAIN..."

A raised profile has the potential to make life more difficult as well. In the past couple of years, rivals have circled the Amex to poach players, managers and backroom staff, while the challenge of finding replacements who can hit the required standard rapidly is also bound to become tougher.

Departures have already punctuated, but not punctured, Brighton's Premier League story to date. There has been no let-up yet in their progression. In the space of 12 months, technical director Dan Ashworth was wooed by Newcastle, pivotal players Yves Bissouma, Marc Cucurella and Leandro Trossard moved on to pastures new, and manager Graham Potter left to take charge at Chelsea. In their place came Weir as Ashworth's replacement, Caicedo, Pervis Estupinan and Mitoma into the starting XI – those four all 'in the building already' – and Roberto De Zerbi to inherit the managerial hot seat. Despite the disruption, Brighton had the best season in their history.

When Chelsea owner Todd Boehly informed Barber last September of his intention to snaffle Potter and several key staff members to Stamford Bridge – only weeks after signing the Seagulls' player of the season, Cucurella, and two months before returning for their head of scouting, Paul Winstanley – it was the biggest test of Brighton's model to date. Barber, who swiftly promoted Paul Jewell's son, Sam, to be head of recruitment, must have felt like he was constantly having to open his secret succession-planning dossier.

"IF YOU GET EVERYTHING RIGHT, THERE SHOULDN'T BE A CEILING. ANYTHING IS POSSIBLE FOR US"

"It's not a perfect science because in an ideal world you wouldn't, for example, be changing your manager a month into a new season," says the chief executive of Potter's move. "But Roberto De Zerbi was available because unfortunately war had broken out in Ukraine, and the role he had at Shakhtar Donetsk was no longer viable for him. I don't want to say war is a lucky thing because of course it's not, but the timing was fortunate for us: without it, Roberto probably wouldn't have been available and our succession plan for Graham would have taken a different turn. Those are the dynamics we can't control."

With so many variables, there's the obvious danger that not everything continues to work out exactly according to Bloom's vision. One misjudged coaching hire, a couple of signings not fulfilling their potential, or simply a run of poor form could threaten to derail progress if Brighton allow doubt or even panic to set in.

Barber and his boss – a poker professional, remember – know the importance of holding their nerve when other chairmen and chief executives may lose theirs. Decisions have to be made for the right reasons, without losing sight of the club's long-term approach. That cold-blooded decision-making was required in 2019 when they decided to dismiss Chris Hughton, the manager who had led them to promotion and twice kept them up, in order to replace him with Potter, who had never coached at a Premier League outfit before.

"There are no guarantees in top-level sport and success isn't achieved in a straight line," says Barber. "There will be bumps in the road and you have to build resilience. There are times when, despite the best planning in the world and best progression of your talent on and off the field, things don't work.

"We have a culture at this club where we're transparent, we communicate, and we don't hide when it goes wrong. We try to be as visible in the bad times as we are in the good times – hopefully that brings stability back faster and breeds confidence, so we can get over that bump and achieve progression in a slightly different way to how we'd initially imagined or planned.

"It's about not deviating from your plan when you hit a bump, because it will happen. If you deviate every time you hit a bump, you will deviate a lot. That breeds instability, reduces confidence and impacts on morale, and then you get people wanting to leave."

That philosophy has helped Brighton to progress further than most people outside of the club ever thought possible. So, how high can the Seagulls fly?

"If you get everything right, there shouldn't be a ceiling," Barber answers effusively. "I'm not saying we're going to be challenging for a Premier League title or winning a European cup, but if we keep pushing, keep improving, keep finding new ways to compete and keep being as smart as we can, then anything is possible for us."

It'd take a brave man to disagree: Brighton have proved all doubters wrong up to now.


Below De Zerbi was an inspired, if fortuitous, find for the Seagulls
Below right Barber plans to stick to the plan
Bottom right Albion's support shows no sign of flagging (sorry)







RICE



Recent months have been memorable for England's rapping midfielder – after lifting a European trophy in his last game for West Ham, he joined Arsenal for a club record £105m in July. As he tells *FFT*, he's determined to guide the Gunners to glory

Words Chris Flanagan
Pictures Stuart Manley


RICE
BABY

"HOW OLD IS THAT TORTOISE?"

Declan Rice may be the most expensive British footballer of all time these days, but he's lost none of his curiosity about the age of domesticated reptiles. Arsenal's £105m club-record signing is back on familiar turf this afternoon, meeting *FourFourTwo* at our base for the day – a location in leafy Cobham, complete with a pet tortoise wandering around quietly in the background. It's 15, thanks for asking.

Coincidentally, we're just a few hundred yards from Chelsea's training ground, where the Kingston-born midfielder learned his trade between the ages of seven and 14. "I spent the first part of my career coming to this area, every Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday," he explains to *FFT*. Today, our location has nothing to do with the Blues and everything to do with convenience – Rice is popping in to see us on his way home from his new training base at London Colney.

FFT have sat down with the 24-year-old twice before, in August 2019 and November 2021. Despite a significant increase in fame and status over the last four years, he's still the same down-to-earth personality as he ever was, happily chatting to everyone after arriving for his photoshoot, making small talk about the household pet and instantly cracking a smile for the camera when we're ready to get started. Soon, he's donning Arsenal's cult classic bruised banana away shirt from the early 1990s and chuckling self-deprecatingly, having almost toppled over when asked to lean forward for one particular photograph.

That friendliness and approachability is something he places great emphasis upon – on his first day at Arsenal in July, he made sure he was exactly the same, saying hello to as many people as he could, eager to make a good impression and waste no time in beginning to build relationships. He even made sure to quickly befriend the training ground dog: a chocolate labrador called Win, both named and introduced to the club this year by Gunners manager Mikel Arteta, in a bid to further boost the family atmosphere around the place.

"New signings are sometimes a bit quiet when they arrive at a club, and they take time to be integrated," says Rice. "But with

Below Friendly but now with laser-like focus on winning, he means business



me, I wanted to speak to everybody, to all the staff, the physios, the chefs. I've always been outspoken at the training ground – as a character I've just always been like that."

That willingness to put himself out there is part of the reason why he's long been regarded as a natural leader, and why he was chosen to succeed mentor Mark Noble as skipper during his spell at West Ham. In time, no one will be surprised if he becomes England captain – current armband-wearer Harry Kane is unlikely to be hanging up his boots for a while, but once a vacancy does open up, Rice appears the most obvious of obvious choices.

"I DIDN'T SLEEP WITH THE TROPHY!"

As the years have gone by, various people have remarked that there's almost a comic book hero quality about Rice. "It was a Roy of the Rovers goal," West Ham gaffer David





Above and right Rice's West Ham story was given a perfect ending

Moyes declared in April, after the midfielder ran from his own half to net a stunning goal against Gent and help the Hammers to reach the Europa Conference League semi-finals.

Rice was to West Ham what Roy Race was to Melchester Rovers – inspirational in every way, the star of a storyline that will never be forgotten. He was the pivotal figure in West Ham's climb from the lower reaches of the Premier League to European group-stage qualification for the first time in their history, before darting from halfway to score against Dinamo Zagreb in their opening group game, bravely revelling in front of the home side's ultras for good measure. He was the man who stepped up when no one else could, to score the last-gasp leveller at Kidderminster and prevent FA Cup humiliation in February 2022. Two months later, he was also the man who struck a crucial goal at Lyon to send the Hammers to the Europa League semi-finals, leaving their fans partying on the streets of France. All that, from a defensive midfielder.

Then in Prague this June, in what most people already suspected would be his 245th and final appearance for the east Londoners, he lifted a European trophy as captain – only the second skipper in West Ham history to do so, after the idolised Bobby Moore. It was a story that couldn't have concluded any more perfectly if Rice had scripted it himself.

"Definitely," he reflects now, still smiling at the memory. You sense he's been smiling ever since. "The whole six years at West Ham was perfect. We had some great seasons in the Premier League, nearly qualified for the Champions League and played in a Europa League semi-final. Then to reach the final of the Conference League and win it late on – it was the best thing that could have happened. The greatest moment of my career so far."

A year earlier, Rice had been distraught as the Hammers fell to Eintracht Frankfurt in the ▸

"THAT NIGHT WAS SO EMOTIONAL – WHEN BOWEN RAN THROUGH AND SCORED, I FELT RELIEF TO BE HONEST"



Europa League semis. The emotion spilled over via his criticism of Spanish referee Jesus Gil Manzano, such had been his desire to win a trophy for the club that gave him his break at the highest level, following his release by Chelsea. His manager Moyes had similarly let his frustration boil over that night, sent from the touchline after kicking a ball at a ballboy.

Together, the duo went back to the drawing board, and did everything in their power to ensure that when the Conference League came around, this time they went all the way. When Jarrod Bowen raced clear in the 90th minute of the final against Fiorentina, the moment had arrived. "It's up for grabs now," bellowed commentator Adam Summerton, borrowing the great Brian Moore's legendary line from Arsenal's last-gasp title triumph at Anfield in 1989. West Ham and the Gunners, united by an immortal sentence – and now by Declan Rice.

A European showpiece would have meant so much to him at any stage of his career – given that there was a significant chance it could be his swansong in West Ham colours, it was even more consequential. Two years earlier, Rice had experienced the other side of a major final, with England at the Euros. "That feeling of seeing all the Italian players running off, then lifting the trophy in front of us – it was horrible, one that I don't want to feel again," he told *FFT* in 2021.

Understandably, in Prague, the pressure he felt to win was enormous. "When Jarrod ran through and scored, I felt relief to be honest," he explains now. "When you go into a final, you never know what's going to happen. One team is going to walk away disappointed and one team is going to be buzzing. When Jarrod went one-on-one with the goalkeeper, to see him score and our fans erupt, it was unbelievable. That night was so emotional. To win, to hear the fans singing my name, then to lift the trophy, it was just so special."

Rice's family, his two brothers included, were in the crowd to witness it all. The West Ham skipper was soon joined on the pitch by his young nephew, both dancing together in front of the fans. "He got onto the pitch with me and was singing some songs," chuckles Rice. "So many people were asking me who he was and I was saying, 'He's my nephew!' Then all of my family ran on, which was very special. They've always been with me, mum and dad, and I've kept my brothers close as well, that support network. They've been key, supporting me through the tough times and the good times. You need that."

The next morning, Rice posed for pictures kissing the trophy in bed in his hotel room, although he laughs when we ask whether he actually spent the night alongside it. "No, no, I didn't sleep with it!" he insists. "The cabinet was right outside my room, so in the morning I just dragged it in!"

Above The Rice fam get the party started in Prague

The team returned to London and boarded an open-top bus from Upton Park to Stratford town hall, where Rice raised the trophy aloft once again at a civic reception attended by thousands of euphoric Hammers fans. "That day represented what West Ham's all about," he says now. "From the old Boleyn Ground to Stratford, it was just insane – I've never seen anything like it."

THE FINAL GOODBYE

That civic reception would be his final act as a West Ham player. That day, David Sullivan confirmed that a transfer seemed imminent. "We promised him he could go," revealed the Hammers chairman. "You can't ask for a man

MAYBE IT'S BECAUSE I'M A LONDONER

Declan Rice has represented three different capital clubs at youth and senior level – this trio played for even more teams in England's biggest city

BOBBY ZAMORA

Born in east London, the frontman departed for Bristol Rovers and was prolific at Brighton prior to returning for a tour of the capital. A Spurs spell proved short-lived, but he bagged play-off final winners for West Ham and QPR either side of Europa League heroics with Fulham. When the ball hits the goal for one of several London teams, that's Zamora...



SCOTT PARKER

Apart from two months on loan at Norwich and that two-year stint when he accidentally joined Newcastle, thinking they were actually Elephant & Castle, the Lambert-born pass master spent his entire career in the capital, representing Charlton, Chelsea, West Ham, Spurs and Fulham. It makes his decision to accept the Club Brugge job all the more peculiar.



CLIVE ALLEN

No player knows London quite like Stepney boy Allen, who turned out for a magnificent seven clubs in the city. Sort of: after beginning at QPR, he lasted only three pre-season games and 62 days at Arsenal before being puzzlingly sold to Crystal Palace. He later joined Spurs, Chelsea and West Ham, then left the Hammers for their rivals Millwall. Fearless.



who has committed more to us this season. There are three or four clubs who have shown interest, and I expect the offers will start to come in today."

Despite rumoured interest from a host of sides including Bayern Munich, Manchester United and his old club Chelsea, eventually it was Arsenal and Manchester City who duked it out for his signature.

The Premier League champions went as far as having a £90m bid turned down, but it had already been widely reported that Rice's preference was to join the Gunners, who were ready to go further in their attempts to seal a deal. City withdrew, leaving the path clear for Arsenal to agree a £105m club-record transfer, surpassing the £72m fee they paid for Lille's Nicolas Pepe in 2019. It would also make Rice the most expensive Britsh player ever, topping Jack Grealish's £100m move to City two years ago.

Before officially finalising the switch – on a five-year contract, with the option for an extra year – Rice had no shortage of people to say goodbye to. "I called David Moyes and we had a really nice conversation," says Rice. "I felt like we owed it to each other to speak – I have so much respect for him. I talked to Nobes [Mark Noble], too: it was a hard one for him because he's Mr West Ham, but he was buzzing for me. He was so happy that I could push myself and compete in the Champions League this year. He said, 'It's nothing more than you deserve'.

"Some of the players messaged me as well – I had plenty of replies in the group chat we shared together, I was taken aback. They're all such close friends of mine and I speak to them regularly. I texted the manager ahead of the first game this season, simply to say, 'Good luck for the season and see you soon'. He replied, which was nice.

"I want to keep a positive relationship with him because he was so good to me, and the supporters were, too – they're special. I know it's hard when you see a player move on to another club, but I'm sure they understand – hopefully when I see them again, I'll be able to say goodbye properly.

"It'll be pretty strange when I play against West Ham this season, because there are so many lads I know and get on with – they'll be saying stuff on the pitch, I'm sure! We've got them at the Emirates Stadium first [on Boxing Day], then at the London Stadium later in the season, and it'll be brilliant to go back there and see everyone." ▶

"IT WAS HARD FOR NOBES AS HE'S MR WEST HAM. HE SAID, 'IT'S NOTHING MORE THAN YOU DESERVE'"



As he speaks fondly about his former club, it's clear he means every single word. During 10 years at West Ham, six in the first team, memories were created that he'll cherish for the rest of his life. He may be wearing another shirt these days, but his love for the Hammers will never diminish.

"To be called a West Ham legend one day, maybe, would be a real honour," the then 20-year-old told *FFT* back in 2019, when we suggested to him that he had the potential to achieve precisely that. Four years ago, Rice was modest enough to state it merely as an ambition rather than an expectation. Today, he remains modest enough to be reluctant to assume he accomplished his mission – even though only he, Moore and Billy Bonds have ever lifted any sort of major silverware at the club.

"I was the third ever captain to lift a trophy for West Ham, but I wouldn't say whether I'm a legend or not," he replies now. "I just tried to perform as well as I could across the nearly 250 appearances I made. I gave everything for the club, never missed training and played every game with my heart on my sleeve.

"Without West Ham, I don't know where I'd be. To become a footballer is really tough in itself, but when I got my opportunity, I took it and had the backing of the fans and all the managers and players I worked with – I feel like I kept rising each season. Every year there were more questions. Can he do it again? Can he get better? Can he keep being West Ham's star man? I loved taking that challenge on – I wanted to perform for the supporters and give them excitement every week.

"Being made captain of such a historic club was a proud moment, and the feeling I had after scoring my first ever goal for West Ham [against Arsenal in 2019] will never leave me, the way the stadium erupted that day. There are so many highlights: the relationships I've formed, the connection with the fans and the staff. I couldn't have asked for anything more. West Ham made me the man I am."

SO GOOD THEY SIGNED HIM TWICE

From day one at Arsenal, Rice has brought the exact same commitment and dedication to his new club. He knows no other way. His bond with the Gunners fanbase was instant, and will only keep growing.

As his career progressed in recent seasons, with England as well as West Ham, it was clear that a big-money transfer was always a question of when rather than if. Finally the day arrived in mid-July, as he completed his switch to the Emirates – putting pen to paper not once but twice. Arsenal were presumably taking no chances.

"We signed at the training ground and we signed at the stadium," reveals Rice. "It was such an amazing feeling to sign for Arsenal, just because of how historic the club is, and a proud moment for myself, to get to where I've got to, making a big move. It's all been a whirlwind – I'm still only settling in now, to be honest. It's hard to describe how intense but good it's been. It's exactly how I wanted to push myself and exactly what I needed."

Given the interest from several heavyweight clubs, including Treble winners Manchester City, why was he was so keen to join Arsenal? "I looked at the squad, how young everyone was, how good they've been for the last two or three seasons, not only last year, and the trajectory they're currently on," he explains. "I saw myself fitting in, slotting in nicely, and the manager had a huge say in winning me over. It was the perfect fit, being a London boy and getting to play for Arsenal – I think it was the perfect move for me at this stage of my career."

The fact the Gunners and their manager were so enthusiastic did much to persuade him. Since leaving Highbury for the Emirates in 2006, Arsenal have hardly been known for pushing the boat out with transfer fees, but they viewed Rice as so important to Arteta's project that they made an exception – the first time they'd broken the British transfer record for a domestic player since recruiting Alan Ball in 1971. Sporting director Edu and chief executive officer Vinai Venkatesham jetted to Los Angeles to talk to Stan and Josh Kroenke, presenting a case as to why they should splash the cash on Rice. The owners listened, and gave the green light.

"When you're wanted as a footballer and a club really goes for you, that's special," says Rice. "And it's not like when they try to sign you, they do everything, then when you get to the club you're quickly forgotten. I still feel that love from everyone, the energy. It's how they support you, how nice all the staff are, how everyone talks to you, how the training is, just genuinely how the club is one family, because the boss has pushed the emphasis on that. I'm enjoying it."

Even during his initial weeks working with Arteta, he's been thoroughly impressed by what he's seen. "It's tactically, how he sets his teams up, the different ways he has of playing," he continues. "You have to learn it all and it's extremely difficult, because there are so many things going on in your brain – mentally, it's demanding.

"It's learning more about my position, how he demands so much from you and the team, how intense he is in a good way and how he pushes you. If you're a lone number six, when you're playing for Arsenal it's incredibly tough. You're the heartbeat of the team and need to be on the ball constantly, so it's where you position yourself on the pitch and also about helping others. Sometimes it's better to stay away from the ball to open up stuff for your team-mates... just loads of different tactics. Now matches are so mentally draining for me, as there's a lot going on inside my head on top of playing football.

"But I know there's so many more levels to reach and feel like Mikel is the best manager to take me there. I learned so much over my time under David Moyes and he improved me as a player. Now I can add a new dimension to my game – things I possibly hadn't worked on before, weaknesses I had, and Mikel can bring the best out of me. That's why I decided to join Arsenal."

RECORD BREAKERS

In the Premier League era, Arsenal have now broken their own transfer record nine times...

Dennis Bergkamp
£7.5m

Thierry Henry
£11m

Sylvain Wiltord
£13m

Andrey Arshavin
£15m

Mesut Ozil
£42.5m

Alexandre Lacazette
£46.5m

Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang
£55.5m

Nicolas Pepe
£72m

DECLAN RICE
£105m







Left Arteta and Edu unveil their new No.41; Rice ruled the midfield in Arsenal's win at Crystal Palace

Inevitably, while his status as an England regular had already put him in the spotlight, the £105m price tag will place even more media focus on him this term. By now, he's experienced enough to know there's nothing he can do to change that.

"It's crazy," says Rice, asked how he might have reacted as a child, had he been told he'd be worth £105m one day. "But to be honest, I've not even thought about it. The transfer obviously happened, £105m, I can't do much about that, it is what it is. If anything, I think it shows how well I played at West Ham over the last few years. I've established myself as a Premier League player in the past four or five years – I've not played for one season, then another comes and I've been bought for that. I know the Premier League inside out, I've got experience even though I'm young, and I want to pay that back. Hopefully I can."

Asked how he deals with the media focus that a player of his status will always receive, his answer is simple. "I just don't listen to it or read it," he says. "When I was a kid I used to get affected by it so much more, but now I take everything with a pinch of salt. Things will be news for a couple of hours, then the day after it's forgotten – it's part and parcel of football. If you play well you get praised, if you don't play well, especially with my price tag, you get criticised and people want to talk about you. But that's why we play football – people are asked to give their opinions and I can't stop that."

JAMIE REDKNAPP: RUNNING MAN

Five years ago, without a heap of experience behind him, a 19-year-old Rice was notably more fragile. In his first interview with *FFT*, he looked back on the opening day of the 2018-19 campaign, when he was substituted at half-time against Liverpool with West Ham 2-0 down. He doubted himself so much on the return trip to London that he decided to ask manager Manuel Pellegrini if he could go on loan to a Championship club. Wisely, the Chilean boss said no, and Rice soon regained his confidence and flourished.

Half a decade on, he was making his debut for Arsenal on the opening day of the new season as an entirely more confident person. "Definitely," he tells *FFT* now. "I was only a kid in 2018 – you play in the Premier League, you make mistakes, and back then when you're just starting out, you think it's the end of the world. I'm still going to make mistakes now, ▶

"ARSENAL WAS THE PERFECT FIT, BEING A LONDON BOY – IT FELT RIGHT AT THIS POINT IN MY CAREER"



but I'm more mature, I'm older and I realise it's not the end of the world if you do make a mistake. I have so much more confidence going onto a football pitch."

Even his hairstyle signifies that – gone is the aggressive-looking close shave of 2018, in its place the flowing locks of someone who seems totally comfortable in their own skin. Commercial deals have duly followed – travel around London and you'll see the midfielder's face on billboards and bus stops, promoting Muller Rice alongside the slogan 'Rice Rice Baby'. That phrase was born two years ago, when he made a surprise appearance during a karaoke night on Twitter Spaces, belting out his adapted version of Vanilla Ice's *Ice Ice Baby* as thousands listened in live. Since then, Rice has even gone on Sky panel show *A League Of Their Own* to rap it again, while Micah Richards and Jamie Redknapp added Running Man dance moves alongside him.

Confidence still flowing through his veins, Rice helped his new club to begin the current Premier League campaign with a 2-1 victory over Nottingham Forest – his first ever win in a competitive fixture at the Emirates. "Yeah, it probably would have been," smiles Rice, pondering a fact that had not occurred to him on the day itself. "I played there every season with West Ham, but we never won. What a stadium though, it was incredible – the place was absolutely rocking and I'm sure it's going to get even better."

"THEY WERE SENSATIONAL AND DESERVED THE TITLE – NOW THE AIM IS TO GO A STEP FURTHER"

Bottom "One game, one trophy – bosh!" **Below, left to right** Will it ever stop? Yo, we don't know; his first ever win at the Emirates; is Dec the Gunners' new Pat?

Come the end of this season, it will be 20 years since the Gunners last won the Premier League trophy, thanks to the Invincibles of 2004. Rice was just five years old back then. "Wow, that's insane," he says, at a startling piece of information that will make plenty of people feel pretty old. Understandably, he can't pinpoint any memories he has from the time itself. "Not at five years old – I can't







even remember what I did yesterday!" he laughs. "I'm not sure if we'll see an invincible season again. That Arsenal team are legends and will be spoken about forever. With this young squad we have, we want to be seen in a similar light as well, and I believe we've got the team to push."

Arsenal came agonisingly close to glory last season, leading the standings for much of the campaign before faltering in the final weeks with draws against Liverpool, Southampton and Rice's West Ham, where the Gunners led 2-0 but were pegged back.

Arteta's outfit impressed many people last term, however, Rice included. "I thought they were brilliant," he says. "Other than the blip at the end, they were sensational to watch, and to play against them was really tough. They deserved to win the league – it wasn't meant to be, but this year that's the aim, to go one step further.

"When I played against Arsenal with West Ham, it was the energy, the spirit, the drive, everything. It was how Mikel pushes his team from the sideline – you could see how up for it he was. It makes you want to play for him and get the win. When you face them, they suffocate you, run hard, press hard and make it extremely hard for the opponent."

In other words, it's a style that suits Rice down to the ground. "Definitely – I like to be high energy, front foot, winning my duels and winning my tackles, as a number six or number eight," he enthuses. "I know Mikel loves that, too."

For many years after Patrick Vieira exited Highbury for Juventus in 2005, the Gunners never replaced what the Frenchman offered – a dominating midfielder who brought not just outrageous talent, but personality and grit, giving the team a foundation from which they enjoyed copious success. While Rice isn't exactly the same type of player, some have suggested that he can provide many of those qualities in the club's bid to become league champions once more.

"It's a big pressure and big challenge," he says of that comparison. "Vieira was the best in that position during that era – a monster, energy, legs, character, leadership... he had the lot. I'm still trying to add all of that to my game, even though I've got it in small doses. I'm trying to push myself to be at that level – hopefully I can emulate something of that sort for this club.

"I try to impose myself on a football pitch, to give my all, be high energy, be vocal to help my team-mates. They're little things you do to try to help. We already have many leaders in the side who demand and push each other – to add one more can only be a good thing."

Vieira won a trophy in his very last game for the Gunners – the 2005 FA Cup Final against Manchester United – and Rice won a trophy in his very first, steering Arsenal to victory in the curtain-raising Community Shield. After his Conference League win for West Ham, it meant he'd bagged a winners' medal in two consecutive club games for different teams.

When Arsenal beat Forest 2-1 a week after the Community Shield, did Rice expect to see a presentation ceremony purely out of habit? ▸



"I'D BE LIMITING MY ABILITY PLAYING AT THE BACK. I'VE GOT MORE TO GIVE IN THE MIDDLE AND GOING FORWARD"

Rice explains to *FFT* tactical guru **Adam Clery** why he relishes his central role

If you were a manager and had Declan Rice in your team, what would you say to get the best out of him on the pitch?
Express yourself, go out there and show everyone how good you are. A lot of coaches gave me similar advice when I was at West Ham – before games, Kevin Nolan was so good at that with me. He'd say some lovely words, then I'd head out and not think about anything other than playing well.

When you say express yourself, do you mean on the ball?
Yeah, because the Premier League is such high pressure, and it's not worrying about that. In the early stages of my career, when I was 17 or 18, I was going out trying not to fail or make any mistakes. You're thinking, 'Oh my god, I'm playing in the Premier League – if I make one little mistake, I'm going to be scrutinised'. Playing in midfield, you have to be on your game 24/7. You can't have dips because you're always on the ball, getting it off the backline, trying to progress the ball. If you don't do that, it stops the flow of the game for the team. Now, I go out feeling totally confident that I'm going to have a good game – I'm going to win my first tackle, first header and start on the right foot.

Do you like being on the ball?
I love it. You saw at West Ham last year how much responsbility I took, driving the team forward with the ball, scoring more goals, trying to make more assists and key passes. I enjoyed the more attacking role.

Which types of midfielders do you like to play with?
I'm enjoying playing with the ones at Arsenal now. Jorginho is so good at keeping the ball. He's so smart at passing and moving, keeping the ball ticking, and Thomas Partey is just as good. Martin Odegaard is so intelligent – you can pass to any of them and know they're going to be safe with it, you're going to get the ball back and they're going to drive you forward. If one goes, I'll stay – there's a good balance between us.

Are you better in a two or three-man midfield?
It doesn't make a difference. With England I play as a lone six with two eights; at West Ham I played in a double six with a 10; at Arsenal I've been on my own, or in a two, or higher up. I don't mind. I like to adapt and do what the gaffer asks.

There was talk you might become a centre-back one day. Could you?
I don't think I'm a centre-back at all. Sure, I could fill in there – I know the basics of the position because I played there for three years. I'd be comfortable with the way Mikel Arteta wants to make passes from the back. I could do all of that. But I'd be limiting my ability if I played at the back – I've got so much more to give in the middle, and so much more to give going forward. I think my best position is midfield.

Could you see yourself playing even further up the pitch, then?
I have been. In my first couple of Arsenal matches I was a number eight, higher up in the pocket, a bit to the left – kind of like the role that Granit Xhaka had last season. I did that quite a lot last year with West Ham, so I know I'm capable of it and love it – it frees you up more. You're constantly moving to get on the ball and give yourself time and space. When teams play Arsenal, they often sit back and the space isn't always there. It requires loads of patience and ball circulation, but I like playing eight and like playing six. I'm comfortable in both areas.



Watch Adam's tactical videos on YouTube – just search for 'FourFourTwo' or scan here



"IT'S EASY TO PLAY WITH JUDE. I'LL SAY, 'YOU GO AND ATTACK, AND I CAN DO WHAT I DO BEST'"

"No!" he laughs. "But the Community Shield was a good trophy to win. We went 1-0 down but we stuck at it. Obviously we've got bigger ambitions this year – three domestic trophies and the Champions League. We 100 per cent want to be winning some trophies.

"That's why I'm at Arsenal, that's why the players have such high belief for the season, because we believe we can do it. City are such a tough team to beat, probably the best in the world right now, so they're going to take some stopping. But we believe we can do it."

If they could, would helping the club to end a 20-year drought make it even more special to be part of? "Yeah, 100 per cent," he says. "I think Arsenal fans have been demanding it for years, and rightly so because of how big the club is and how talented the squad is. It's been so long since that big trophy was there, so hopefully we can do it for them."

He's been relishing the prospect of playing in the Champions League, too. Aged 13, Rice was a Chelsea ballboy throughout the season when the Blues won the competition for the first time, sitting wide-eyed pitchside during famous victories over Napoli and Barcelona. As an Arsenal player, he intends to guide the Gunners to maiden European Cup glory. He already knows a thing or two about winning continental trophies, after all.

"Arsenal got so close in 2006," says Rice, referencing their defeat to Barcelona in that year's final. "To add that to the trophies the club has won would be top. In club football, the Champions League is the biggest thing

Below and right Conducting England to World Cup victory over Wales in Qatar; celebrating Phil Foden's strike against the Dragons

you can play in – I've been looking forward to hearing that anthem for the first time. A club like Arsenal deserves to be in the Champions League, and I feel like anything could happen. Look at Inter last season – they went all the way to the final and no one expected that, so you can go on a great run. I believe we can compete with the best."

THE DOG DAYS ARE OVER

Away from the intense pressures of elite-level football, Rice has been developing another sporting prowess in recent times. "Golf is my thing now – I think I've become addicted, to be honest," he says. "This summer especially, I've tried to play as much as I can, whether it's nine holes or 18 holes. We've got a little golf group at Arsenal, so we try to get out as often as possible and play a round. We plan to keep it up and visit many different courses around the country."





At home, he has an adorable dog called Raffa, although the cockapoo doesn't always help him to relax. "Raffa is ledge, even if he's a bit annoying!" chuckles Rice. "He's a good dog. I think all cockapoos are like that – I talk to a lot of people who have them. They're just chaos and that's what he is, but he's sweet, bless him. It's hard to find time to walk him myself because I'm so busy, but he's found a best friend in my dad. They love each other. I think my dad loves him more than I do!"

Rice's international commitments further crowd his schedule, but he'll never complain about that, such is his pride to represent his country. All being well, he could reach a half century of caps for the Three Lions early next year ahead of Euro 2024. "I love playing for England. I'm near 50 caps now, so hopefully I can get that big milestone. There are some important games coming up and another tournament – I feel like everyone is pushing in a good direction. Going into the Euros, we want to make that one step beyond."

After reaching the Euro 2020 Final, going one step further had been the target at the World Cup, too – Rice and his team-mates performed well in Qatar, until France caught them with a couple of sucker punches in the quarter-final and the dream was over.

"We were so unlucky against France – I don't think we deserved to lose that game," recalls Rice now. "But the small moments in football matter, and France won the game in those small moments. There were questions about us ahead of the World Cup. Do England score enough goals? I think when we left the tournament, we'd scored the most goals of any side, with the attacking style we played. We have it in us, for sure. The squad is top, superstars everywhere. It's just about adding it all together and doing it on the pitch, going the extra mile and winning a competition."

Many fans hope the emergence of Jude Bellingham will help with that – Real Madrid's new boy is still only 20 and Rice is 24, so it seems likely that they'll play alongside each other for a long time. "Yeah, I hope so," says Rice. "Since I first played with Jude, in the last two and a half years he's gone up to another level. It's easy to play with him – I'll say, 'Go and attack, and I'll do what I do best', which is what the manager wants. It allows Jude to flourish, so we've got a good relationship and he's only going to get better. At Real, he looks so confident and assured."

Throughout this interview, Rice has projected exactly those same qualities. He's the same person he was when we first met him four years ago, but his words are delivered with greater authority that maturity brings. He's aware he's moving towards the peak years of his career and is determined to extract as much out of them as possible. The jovial, friendly side will never leave him, but the closing few minutes of our chat have made it abundantly clear he has laser-like focus: on winning, on achievement.

"If you'd told me that, at 24, I'd have made more than 250 Premier League appearances, won what I'd won and progressed how I'd progressed, I would have snapped your hand off," he says. "I've only been at Arsenal for two months, but I'm ready to keep pushing. I've got six years at Arsenal, and hopefully they're six very successful ones. In the next 12 months there's the Euros, the Premier League and the Champions League, and I'm hoping we can win trophies. That's the main thing for me. Hopefully in a year's time I'll be sat here with a few medals. That's my aim."

It's a fitting way to end our conversation. "A pleasure, top man, thank you," he says, shaking *FFT* by the hand, then courteously posing for photos with anyone who wants one – making sure to find time to speak to the teenage son of our snapper, who's come along to help out during the school holidays.

The past few months have propelled the midfielder to an even greater stardom than before, but there's still not the tiniest bit of ego about the man. As the tortoise continues to wander around quietly, Rice waves goodbye and departs, in search of further glory over the year ahead.


ROMA

"MY FOCUS WAS ON JOINING ARSENAL, THEN JOSÉ CALLED – IT WAS JUST A NO-BRAINER"

Tammy Abraham has loved life under Mourinho since moving to Roma in 2021, and while the striker is in no hurry to leave Serie A – or pesto – behind, he's not ruling out a Chelsea return...

Words Alasdair Mackenzie

Tammy Abraham beams with health and happiness as the leonine forward strides gracefully into a small meeting room at Roma's training ground. Life is good.

This isn't, admittedly, the usual effect that *FourFourTwo* has on people – the marksman became a father for the first time a few days before we meet. "I don't think the feeling has kicked in yet," he grins proudly. Baby Amari's arrival brought even more joy into a life that has looked rosy ever since the 25-year-old decided to – as Jose Mourinho put it – swap the rain of London for the sunshine of Rome in the summer of 2021.

Adapting to a new team in a new league presented few complications as Abraham ▸



plundered 27 goals in all competitions in his first season with the Giallorossi, the most by a Roma debutant since Rodolfo Volk in 1930. Crucially, it's not just time on the pitch he's enjoying. The food, history and language of his new home are as much a part of the Englishman's maiden overseas adventure. "Pesto is my favourite dish - it's not Roman, but I could eat that every day," he reveals. "I never had it before in England, so coming here was the first time."

For a man who professes he "used to love history at school", Abraham finds himself in a pretty good place. "Seeing the Colosseum in person was an amazing feeling," he says.

As for the language, the Londoner has risen to the challenge with enthusiasm, motivated perhaps by the efforts of friend Fikayo Tomori up north in Milan. His ex-Chelsea team-mate impressed when stepping up for post-match interviews in Italian, something Tammy has also been brave enough to have a crack at. "When I first arrived, everyone was speaking English with me, but as time has gone on people are starting to speak more Italian," he explains. "I'm picking up a few words – for anything I don't know, I'll ask what it means. I can get around, understanding some of the language and trying to speak it."

It's a new life, a new world. In less than two seasons, Abraham has gone from the frustrated fringes of the Chelsea squad to a star of a Roma side that's electrified one of Italy's most passionate fanbases and ended a 14-year trophy drought in last campaign's Europa Conference League. The No.9 was the Giallorossi's top scorer in the competition.

It all could have panned out so differently, had Jose Mourinho not picked up the phone to make a decisive intervention.

"It was time to move on from Chelsea, and I was talking to various clubs in England and Europe," recalls Abraham. "My focus was on a certain London club. I didn't have to move anywhere, I was familiar with the area... it was Arsenal. My dad is a massive Arsenal fan, so he was very keen on it, and everything was going well.

"Then Jose called. I never usually answer numbers I don't have saved in my contacts. But he said, 'Hi Tammy, it's Jose'. I was like, 'Wow, that's a surprise!' He asked how the family was. I was familiar with him because he knew me as a kid at Chelsea. He asked me, 'Are you ready to leave the bad weather behind and come to sunny Rome?' I laughed, we spoke a bit more, he told me about the project, his ambitions for the team. He'd only been at the club a short time, but explained what he'd seen and what it was like.

"I spoke to my agents and they said it was a no-brainer, the perfect time to start a new life, to go abroad and learn about a different culture. I was so ready for it, and I haven't looked back since."

Luckily for Abraham, he had people to lean on for good advice, picking the brains of Italy international Jorginho and ex-Roma defender Antonio Rudiger. "They were telling me it's a great club, with a wonderful stadium and fans," he says. "I used to watch Roma in the Champions League and kind of had an idea,



"JOSE SAID, 'ARE YOU READY TO LEAVE THE BAD WEATHER AND COME TO SUNNY ROME?'"

but coming over here was a crazy experience. Even just arriving at the airport, supporters were waiting for me. I flew private, so didn't know what time I was landing. The fans must have been there from the morning. To have that welcome was mad."

Abraham could also depend on his old pal Tomori, whose move to Milan had just been made permanent after an impressive half-season loan. "Tomori is one of my best pals," says the striker. "He gave me a ring and said he'd heard I was coming to Italy. He told me the fans are passionate, they love football here. I was ready. I didn't try to over-think it too much – if you do that, you start to panic. I just said, 'This is the right time, I'm at the right age, I'm ready to experience football in the world and I don't look back'. I've loved every moment so far."

MOURINHO'S MIND GAMES

The Mourinho factor clearly paid a big part. The Special One made Abraham the marquee signing of his opening transfer window in the Italian capital at a reported £34 million, and their relationship has blossomed since.

"Jose is a legend," enthuses Abraham. "If I wanted to be a manager after football, I'd want to be like him. It's just his persona, his energy. I love it. He's what we call a real boss. He's a leader. When he speaks, you listen. He knows his man management, he's one of the best in the world at that. He knows how to drive you, how to really get under your skin. Even if you're doing amazing, he'll still try to make you do more. He's never satisfied, he always wants the best for you."

Players have waxed lyrical about Mourinho's motivational methods for years, so *FFT* is keen to know specifics.

"Before the semi-final of the Conference League against Leicester, we played a league match and I thought I was having a brilliant game!" he smiles. "I was full of confidence. The following day, Jose called me into the meeting room. We had Leicester in about two days, no time to recover. He said, 'Tam, I don't think you've been good enough'. In my head I was like, 'I've just played pretty well!'. He said, 'I think you can do more'. No problem. When he speaks, I always listen and take his advice. I'm a big guy, I'm strong – he told me he didn't think I scored enough with my head, especially from corners.

"What was crazy was that two days later against Leicester, I scored a header from a corner! I remember trying to work out how he managed to get me to do this. It was so crazy. He spoke about it two days ago, and now I'm scoring with my head."

As resounding a success as that debut season was, a dip in form in the first half of 2022-23 ultimately cost Abraham his dream of making an England World Cup squad. Had the tournament stuck to its regular summer calendar, he would have been hard to ignore, but a return of just four goals in 20 games by the winter break left him in little doubt of the news he was about to receive when Gareth Southgate's name flashed up on his phone.

"He gave me a call the day before the group was announced," says Abraham. "He said I'd hit the wrong form at the wrong time; that it would be unfair not to take the players he's taking because they've been performing well. It was just about me getting back to where I was and trying to be in the next squad.

"I kind of knew in the back of my head already. I wasn't at a stage where I was full of confidence or banging in goals, so I was sort of expecting it, but it's obviously not nice to hear those things."

Abraham took the chance to soak up some sunshine during the winter break and watch the Three Lions' efforts from afar, and after returning he rediscovered some form. Taking time out also allowed him to reflect on what was behind the dip. He highlights changes in the Roma line-up, particularly the departure of "huge player" Henrikh Mkhitaryan to Inter, plus his own mentality.

"I was still getting used to the changes, and at first it was me not focusing on myself," he continues. "If something went wrong, I was the first to blame others instead of sitting back and thinking what I needed to improve to help someone else, or my own reactions. Sometimes if you spot a player like me with my head down, no confidence, it affects the team's confidence as well. I had to snap out ▸

Above "This is why I want you to score more from corners..." **Top** There are worse places to party following European glory


UEFA
TIRANA FINAL 2022
ROMA
1927
bits







of it and say, 'I'm a big player, my team need to see me happy, encouraging and confident', so the vibe passes throughout the side. Once I'd realised that, I was quickly back to playing my football again."

Abraham scored as many Serie A goals – three – in his first six games back as he had in 15 before the World Cup, while setting up another two as his partnership with summer arrival Paulo Dybala started to gel. "Every day we're training with each other, having laughs with each other, and it's paying off in games," says the frontman.

Abraham wasn't the only Englishman who missed out on Southgate's World Cup squad while playing in Serie A. Regular game time alongside Abraham at Roma wasn't enough to push Chris Smalling into contention, and Tomori was also overlooked despite playing a central role in Milan's scudetto last season.

Is it harder to break into the England team while away from the Premier League gaze? "I would say so – I think that's just normal in life," says Abraham. "The Premier League is a league that English people are so familiar with, as it's live on TV. Serie A matches aren't shown as much. I don't remember watching a lot of Serie A when I was living in England. It's difficult. You have to keep doing well, get people to talk about you more, then maybe you've got a chance."

TITI'S WRISTY BUSINESS

A footballer's career can be a winding road that lurches off into unexpected directions. In Abraham's case, that's certainly true.

In the space of seven years, he's played for five clubs, had offers from several others and had to decide between two national teams, after turning down Nigeria as a teenager.

Looking even further back to his formative days coming through the Chelsea academy, Abraham's path could have taken a different route entirely, had his coaches not had the foresight to alter his role. "I don't think I was ever the best player in my team," he says. "There were always players playing above their age groups, and that was never me. It was just me and Tomori. I grew up with him since the age of seven, moving up through the ranks, developing and growing. I was still getting used to my tall body and learning to control my feet.

"I started off as a defender, so never really imagined myself becoming a striker. It was when I was 15 or 16 that I moved forward. I was playing as a winger in one game, and they started to see I that liked scoring goals. Eventually they put me up front."

Just as well they did. Abraham immediately developed a knack for rustling the net, firing Chelsea's youth side to back-to-back UEFA Youth League titles in 2015 and 2016. But for a south London boy who wore a Blues shirt from very young, Abraham's childhood hero might come as a surprise.

"My family were massive Arsenal fans, so I grew up watching them – I'd be lying to say Thierry Henry wasn't my biggest idol," reveals Abraham. "I loved Thierry, and I wanted to be a footballer because of him. Even the way he wore his socks, today I still wear them the same. The way he used to wear his wrist tape – if you notice, I wear wrist tape as well! He's a player I looked up to and loved."

Don't think that just because Tammy is now a role model for kids himself, he was any less starstruck when he first met his hero. "He was doing some TV work before a game and I was warming up," remembers Abraham. "I kicked the ball near him on purpose and went over – he gave me a hug. I don't think I've washed that top since, I've kept it. It was a dream!"

Although Abraham was a prodigious talent at youth level, he had to earn his stripes at Chelsea, like many Stamford Bridge starlets, over a series of loan spells. The forward was sent to three clubs in three years between 2016 and 2019, before eventually forcing his

> "I WENT OVER TO HENRY AND HE GAVE ME A HUG. I HAVEN'T WASHED THAT SHIRT SINCE!"

ITALIAN JOBS

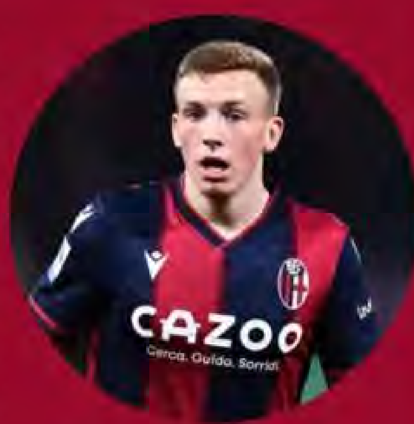
Tammy Abraham, Fikayo Tomori and Chris Smalling are three of 10 Brits currently in Serie A, some enjoying *la dolce vita* more than others



ETHAN AMPADU
The Welsh stopper joined Venezia on loan from Chelsea in 2021-22, but was unable to prevent an instant return to the second tier. Back in Serie A this term, at Spezia, he's again fighting relegation.



JOSH DOIG
The 20-year-old Scot left Hibernian for Hellas Verona last summer – by March he'd scored twice and provided four assists from left-wing-back as the Gialloblu battle to beat the drop.



LEWIS FERGUSON
When Aaron Hickey exited Bologna last July, the Rossoblu needed just three days to lure another Scot – Aberdeen talent Ferguson. The midfielder scooped Serie A goal of the month in November.



LIAM HENDERSON
The former Celtic youngster initially moved to Italy in 2018, joining Bari in Serie B. He steered Hellas Verona into the top tier a year later, and is now at Empoli following a spell with Lecce.



SAMUEL ILING-JUNIOR
The Islington-born England U20 winger swapped Chelsea for Juventus in 2020 at 16. He's come off the bench several times this season, helping to set up two goals against Benfica in the Champions League.



RONALDO VIEIRA
Once a favourite at Leeds, the former England U21 man teamed up with Sampdoria in 2018. After a miserable first half of 2022-23, the midfielder was dispatched to Torino on loan in January.



HARRY WINKS
Vieira isn't the only midfielder with Three Lions links to suffer at Samp this season. Winks, who arrived on loan from Spurs last summer, eventually resumed action in January after an ankle injury.

way into the plans of new boss, and Blues legend, Frank Lampard at his parent club.

"I wouldn't say it was frustrating – I took each one as a challenge, a learning curve," he insists. "It was Championship, Premier League, Championship, so it was a change. But it was a superb experience.

"I had my first loan at Bristol City where I went into men's football. I didn't know the Championship was that difficult. It was game after game after game, but a great learning curve for me. It turned me into a man.

"Then Swansea was my first experience in the Premier League. It was difficult, I learned the other side of football. I'd grown up in the Chelsea academy where we had the ball all the time. At Swansea, we never had the ball. It was tough, I had to understand that side.

"Then there was the amazing season with Aston Villa, getting promoted, which is one of the best feelings in football."

When the news dropped that Abraham's opportunity had finally come with Chelsea, it came as a surprise to the striker. "I never knew I was going to stay," he admits. "I was speaking to Villa at the time, and they told me, 'After this loan, we're going to come and buy you in the summer'. In my head, I was thinking this is the year I move on and go back to Villa. But I remember in pre-season, Frank came up to me and asked if I wanted the No.9 shirt. I was like, 'Wow, that's a shock!' I thought I was going out on loan, then that question popped up, so I had the belief that it might be my year to stay at Chelsea."

Clockwise from above Abraham has won Roman hearts; Dybala is his new partner in crime; mixed emotions with Chelsea; life on loan at Swansea was a challenge; "Give me some pestooooooooo!"

Abraham took his opportunity, notching 15 Premier League goals to finish the season as Chelsea's top scorer, but the London giant's decision to replace Lampard with Thomas Tuchel midway through the following term ultimately spelled the end.

Although the striker finished 2020-21 with a Champions League winner's medal and as the club's joint top scorer in all competitions, his time under Tuchel's stewardship proved frustrating. Abraham struggled to force his way back into the team after injury, and by the business end of the campaign he wasn't even making the bench for the Champions League or FA Cup finals.

"I think I was a little bit unlucky with that situation," he laments. "When Tuchel came in I played the first few games, then I picked up a serious ankle injury. It was one of those annoying injuries that wasn't healing.

"At the time I was injured, the team was doing well, winning games. It's always hard for a player who's injured to come back into a side that's winning regularly. I did get fit again thankfully, but I was sat on the bench, coming on for a few minutes here and there.

I never regained that position after the injuries. I started to realise towards the end that maybe it was time to go. I didn't play as many minutes as I'd liked and wasn't able to express myself as I wanted to. I knew it was time."



Fast-forward nearly a couple of years and speculation about Abraham's future is again rampant. With Chelsea reportedly considering activating a buy-back clause and Manchester United also sniffing around for a new No.9, talk of a summer Premier League return has been incessant in recent months.

Leaning back in his chair with a warm smile flashing frequently across his face, Abraham doesn't look like a man who is quick to anger, but does he find the rumour mill irritating?

"It's never annoying – as a player, to hear that teams want you is always motivating," he says. "It means that you're clearly doing something right and you have interest around the world. You use that as motivation, instead of finding it annoying. It's nice to know that teams are interested in me."

Reuniting with an old flame seldom brings success in this sport, but Abraham won't rule anything out when quizzed on the prospect of another Stamford Bridge stint.

"Would I go back there? In football you can never say never," he states. "Right now, my focus is here at Roma - we want to finish the season strongly. I haven't started thinking about anything yet, apart from being here and doing my best.

"I wouldn't say there's unfinished business in England – I'm in no rush. Football has no location, it could be anywhere. Maybe I stay at Roma for the next decade, maybe I don't. You never know what's around the corner."

For now, then, Tammy Abraham's future is all about pesto and parenthood.

THE FIGHT TO SAVE SAN



SIRO

Milan's iconic stadium has been set for demolition for years, yet uncertainty rumbles on. As *FFT* discovers, not everyone agrees with the plan – even Bruce Springsteen... | **Words** Tom Gennoy





If you come by car, you may spot it from the motorway. Milan's landscape is flat, its buildings low, so the enormous beams that criss-cross the stadium's roof, 80 metres from the ground, are easy to see from afar.

If you come by tram, you'll catch a glimpse somewhere along the Via dei Rospigliosi. Between the heads of your fellow passengers, you'll see the easternmost roof beam as the ground draws nearer. It may be the trusses of the middle section or the tapered end that juts out over the Curva Sud, a wine-red blade slicing into the sky.

Your first sight of San Siro will be most dramatic, however, if you come on the metro. Arrive in daylight and you'll be met with a tantalising semi-reveal as you ascend from the platform, the building's imposing silhouette just visible through the metallic mesh that covers the station exit hall. When you step outside, you see the whole thing in all of its otherworldly glory; the famous columns, the ramps, the naked heft of the stands and the sheer neck-craning scale of the roof. How could anyone want to tear this temple down?

The basic argument is as follows: in order to keep up with their European competition, Milan and Inter must increase their incomes. To do this, both clubs need a new stadium. Either they demolish and rebuild at San Siro, or they leave and build elsewhere – in which case, the current ground will probably have to come down anyway, as it can hardly be left standing around in decay.

Plans to raze and replace this stadium have been circulating for years. So, what's taking so long? Will they, won't they, and why? In search of answers, *FFT* travelled to Milan for a tale of footballing royalty and architectural majesty, of political gridlock and bureaucratic inertia, of burning mopeds and, inevitably, Silvio Berlusconi. We'll tackle questions and raise many others, in pursuit of an answer to the toughest one of all: how do you solve a problem like San Siro?

LA SCALA DEL CALCIO

Opened in 1926, San Siro – named after the district of Milan in which it was built – was a modest little ground in its first iteration, yet radical in one important sense. Whereas most Italian grounds feature running tracks, Milan's football-focused venue has always brought fans closer to the action.

The second phase of the development, completed in 1955, saw it attain the status of an architectural great. Engineers added a semi-autonomous second tier, giving the stadium its trademark exterior: those sloping concrete ramps that wrap around the ground.

In 1980, it was renamed Stadio Giuseppe Meazza, after the legendary Inter and Italy forward who also had a spell with Milan and had died a few months earlier. Finally, in time for the 1990 World Cup, the arena was elevated and enhanced once more with the addition of a third tier, which takes fans to nosebleed heights on three sides of the pitch. The roof, and its unmistakable beams, dates from this phase, as do the venerated exterior columns whose gentle walkways reproduce the motif of the second tier with a hypnotic spiral twist.

Fast forward to 2019 and the stadium's tenants seemingly signed its death warrant. To colossal fanfare, Milan and Inter jointly presented plans for a new ground on the site of San Siro. The Meazza was to be destroyed. One year later, Italian heritage authorities cleared the stadium ready for demolition, confirming that there was neither a cultural nor an artistic reason for its preservation.

"I love San Siro; I'd like to stay here forever and die watching Milan inside this stadium," declares Alessandro Jacobone, a red-and-black-blooded reporter who runs a Milan fan club and dedicates his life to following the team. "I have a heart that beats for San Siro. I grew up here back in the days before the third tier and the roof. But the future of Milan must come first."

Jacobone is convinced San Siro is holding back his beloved Rossoneri ("and Inter too, whatever"). In 2022, Milan were bought by US-based investment group Redbird Capital. The €1.2 billion price tag was a record for a European football club outside the Premier League. The prospect of a new stadium, with all of its attendant money-making potential, made up a sizeable part of the project – and the owners now want to push on with what they paid so much for. They have no tolerance for dithering or delay. "They have knowledge and knowhow about building stadiums," continues Jacobone. "And they're American: time is money."





Clockwise from top A unique sight, and site – no commerical district here; multi-storey car park chic; back then, of course, it was all fields

Redbird Capital want to make money from sellable naming rights, lucrative concessions, hospitality lounges, offices, concerts and NFL games – revenue streams of which the existing stadium offers next to none.

San Siro in its current form certainly isn't swamped by amenities. Inside and out, there is very little to be found in the way of comfort or commerce. The barren landscape that surrounds the ground is only punctured on matchdays by burger vans and people selling scarves and souvenirs.

"It's a monument languishing in the middle of nowhere," says Jacobone, gesturing into the void in front of the stadium. There are no cafés, no shops, no restaurants. Crucially for Jacobone, there isn't even a crèche. "You can come here to see the match, but if you have your wife and kids, there's nowhere for them to spend time waiting for you to watch the game," he laments.

It might not top the childcare tables, but for footballing pedigree, few grounds come close to San Siro. 'La Scala del Calcio' – the counterpart to Milan's world-renowned opera house – is as impressive a stage as a football stadium can hope to be. Across two World Cups, one European Championship and four European Cup or Champions League finals, the Meazza has provided an unforgettable backdrop to history.

The list of players who have called it home is no less than a roll call of greats. Maldini (Cesare), Maldini (Paolo), Rivera, Baresi, Gullit, Van Basten, Shevchenko, Ibrahimovic, Baggio, Pirlo, Eto'o, Ronaldo, Ronaldinho, Cafu, Kaka, Suarez, Zanetti, Matthaus... countless legends have taken up residence in this house.

Then there's the Derby della Madonnina, named after the golden statue of the Virgin Mary at Milan's Duomo (from whose perch, on the cathedral roof, it's possible to see San Siro in the distance). The meeting of these



Top and bottom A nearby chariot racing arena is Milan's preferred location for their new home; San Siro 1-0 Ben Hur

two elite clubs – Milan remains the only city in Europe that is home to two Champions League winners – is a classy derby that takes place in an appropriately classy setting.

Each gigantic tussle sees the Curva Sud and Curva Nord draped in stunning tifos, terrace tapestries woven from pitch level right up to the rafters. They, too, are part of the exquisite attraction of the ground.

By no means, however, are the supporters always on their best behaviour. In a 2001 game between Inter and Atalanta, a curious trophy appeared in the Curva Nord: a moped, belonging – so the tale goes – to the opposing *capo* and captured in a pre-match scuffle. It was beaten, burned and dumped over the railings in the second tier.

They would never have managed it, had it not been for the stairless access provided by the stadium's exterior ramps. Nowhere else in the world would this legendary terrace jape (or act of hooliganism comprising theft, arson and criminal damage, depending on your viewpoint) have been possible. "This stadium is iconic; the memories, the history in the walls, the magic in the air," enthuses Nima Tavallaey Roodsari, lifelong Interista and editor of SempreInter.com. "It's a big part of Inter's identity to play at San Siro."

Until 1947, the Nerazzurri played their home games at the Napoleonic Arena Civica in the city centre. The club struck roots at San Siro after beginning a groundshare with Milan. "But it's time to make new memories," surmises Roodsari, clear-eyed and clinical.

BOB MARLEY AND THE POPES

While the Rossoneri are flush with Redbird readies, Inter's finances aren't nearly as secure. Their rivals have repeatedly stated that they're ready to go it alone if Inter can't find the cash. In February this year, Milan announced they had identified a new patch of land on which to build – by themselves. La Maura, barely half a mile from San Siro, is currently the site of a chariot racing track but privately owned and available for purchase.

Inter's response was to declare that they, too, had found a location – top-secret, of course – outside the city limits but within the metropolitan area, and that they had signed preliminary documents with the site owner.

Some 24 hours passed until Italian papers identified the 'top secret' location as the spacious southern suburb of Assago. After another 24 hours, a press release from local authorities in Assago proclaimed that there had, in fact, been no contact between Inter and themselves, and they were unaware of any preliminary agreement over a stadium. If they should receive proposals for a new ground, which would naturally affect traffic in the area, they would take necessary steps to defend their territory.

And so, following a whirlwind few days, the carousel completed a full rotation and dropped Inter back where they had started – at San Siro. "The two clubs won't wait much longer," says Roodsari. But the clubs aren't the only ones with a say in what goes on.

Luigi Corbani, former vice-mayor of Milan, is the president of the 'Si Meazza' committee, a citizens' initiative to safeguard the ground. *FFT* meets him in the city centre, between the Scala and the Galleria Vittorio Emanuele – a world-famous theatre and a grandiose tribute to a nation builder – to discuss the cultural importance of a football stadium. ▸

"THIS GROUND IS ICONIC; ALL THE MEMORIES, THE HISTORY IN THE WALLS, THE MAGIC IN THE AIR"





"It's a symbol of Milan, not just because it is known all around the world, but because the building is the embodiment of a city that knows how to transform without losing its original identity," says Corbani, with a poetic politician's flair. He's determined to fight the misappropriation and destruction of public property. The stadium, after all, belongs to the citizens of Milan. Why hand it over to the football clubs only so they can tear it down? Wouldn't a privately-owned replacement see San Siro reduced to the status of a financial asset for the super-rich investors who own Milan and Inter?

Corbani's companion on the committee is a concert promoter with famous friends. Claudio Trotta reminisces to *FFT* about Bob Marley's mesmerising 1980 performance in the Meazza and the fabled visits from two Popes, Benedict and Francis, each attended by around 80,000 worshippers.

Soon he alights on his favourite subject. One client of whom he is proud, an American rock star of some renown whose concerts in Italy it is Claudio's job to organise, apparently has a great amount of sympathy with the committee's cause. "As Bruce Springsteen said," recounts Claudio, "'When you destroy a stadium like this, you don't just destroy the cement or concrete – you destroy the soul of the people who were inside'."

Last December, Vittorio Sgarbi, the Italian Undersecretary for Culture, stated that he would do everything in his power to protect San Siro from the bulldozers. It was a promise to play the conservationists' trump card, enacting the elusive *vincolo* – an injunction from Italian heritage authorities, forbidding the building's destruction. Soon afterwards, however, Sgarbi's own boss insisted those promises were meaningless by announcing that decision-making power rested solely with the mayor of Milan.

Luciano Mondellini, editor of Italian football and finance journal *Calcio e Finanza*, laughs out loud as remembers the mess that was made by Sgarbi's short-lived pronouncement. "You've got Sgarbi, who says that he will veto demolition for artistic reasons – then you've got his boss at the Ministry of Culture, who says, 'No, the veto doesn't exist'," chuckles Mondellini. "So, who's right? You'd need to be a jurist to work it out."

None of this is any help to the Milan mayor, Beppe Sala, whose thankless job it is to decide what happens next. It's up to him to keep Milan and Inter happy without destroying his city's heritage; to protect municipal property without chasing two historic football teams out of town. The *vincolo* is exactly what he needs: an outside intervention to relieve him of the responsibility for making an impossible decision. "The last thing Sala wants is to go down in history as the mayor who tore down San Siro," explains Mondellini.

Above Divine Ponytail, divine setting; is every little thing gonna be all right for Milan's temple?

IN 2020, ITALIAN HERITAGE AUTHORITIES DECLARED NO CULTURAL, ARTISTIC REASON TO PRESERVE THE STADIUM

Sala has further been subjected to public pressure to greenlight the new stadium from Deputy Prime Minister Matteo Salvini, whose patience with the ongoing saga is wearing increasingly thin. Salvini, in turn, has found himself at odds with the opinion of another powerful politician. Silvio Berlusconi, the former Prime Minister who also happened to own Milan for more than 30 years, has been a vocal critic of the plans to destroy Stadio Meazza. Mondellini summarises the situation well: "It's very, very complicated."

In a story of so many lasting uncertainties, here are a selection of straightforward facts. The stadium will host the opening ceremony at the Winter Olympic Games in 2026. Sala's second and final term as mayor concludes in the same year, meaning Milan will have a new municipal governor. The current lease deal between the city and the two clubs – the basis for Milan and Inter tenancy at San Siro – expires in 2030.

There is a great number of possible endings to this palaver, plenty of which are plausible, and many of which involve a gloomy climax for Stadio Meazza.

Nothing is settled yet, but dark clouds are forming over San Siro and time is not on the stadium's side. If you've never been, go soon. The future of a footballing icon is hanging by a thinning thread.

SAN SIRO'S ICONIC CLASHES

Featuring classic finals, famous photos and the greatest foul in football history



ITALY 1-0 AUSTRIA (1934)

Eight years after its opening, San Siro hosted three games at the World Cup. Germany overcame Sweden 2-1 in the quarter-finals before a paltry 3,000-'strong' crowd, then 35,000 watched Italy's semi-final against Austria. Enrico Guaita scored to steer the hosts towards a controversial Mussolini-inspired World Cup triumph in Rome days later.



CAMEROON 1-0 ARGENTINA (1990)

Diego Maradona's Argentina turned up as world champions for Italia 90's curtain-raiser, only to lose 1-0 to nine-man Cameroon, whose second red card was courtesy of Benjamin Massing's sensational act of war on Claudio Caniggia. San Siro's other five games at this tournament all involved West Germany; only one involved Frank Rijkaard's spit, though.



INTER 0-6 MILAN (2001)

The pair finished fifth and sixth in the 2000-01 Serie A – Inter just ahead, despite the derby's biggest ever defeat. Andriy Shevchenko (above) netted twice, Serginho once... and so did pub-quiz answers Gianni Comandini (twice) and Federico Giunti (once). Neither had scored a league goal for Milan before. Neither scored a league goal for Milan again.



INTER 0-3 MILAN (2005)

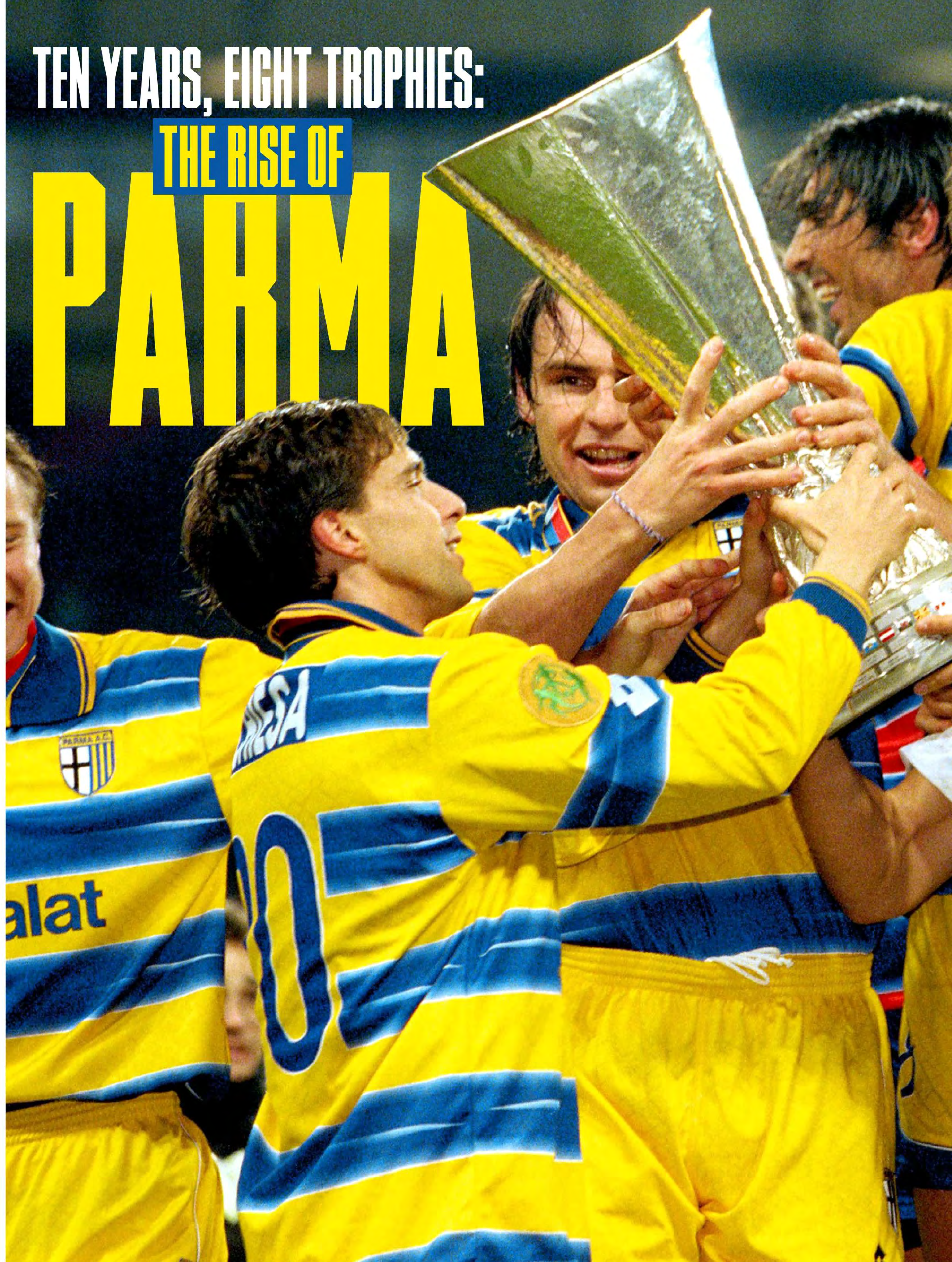
Milan edged Inter on away goals in the 2003 Champions League semi-finals, despite both teams playing both legs at home; two years later, they met again in the quarters. The second leg was abandoned after Inter supporters struck Milan keeper Dida with a flare: Milan, comfortably ahead anyway, were awarded a win and we all got a great photo.



REAL MADRID 1-1 ATLETICO (2016)

In the first of San Siro's four European Cup finals, Inter's 1965 side beat Benfica 1-0 to lift the trophy in their own ground, and no club has done it since. They've all been tight affairs here: Feyenoord saw off Celtic in extra time (1970), Bayern Munich beat Valencia on penalties (2001), then Real Madrid boringly did the same to their upstart rivals (above).

TEN YEARS, EIGHT TROPHIES: THE RISE OF PARMA





A little-known Italian club became one of Europe's leading lights in the 1990s, boasting a squad packed with cult heroes and future legends. Three decades after Parma lifted their first continental trophy, *FFT* learns from those involved just how they did it

Words Chris Flanagan
Additional reporting Daniele Verri



Seven games, zero goals scored. By late February in 1990, Parma's Serie A dream was slipping away. Weeks earlier, the club had been rocked by the death of their long-serving president, Ernesto Ceresini; now, they just couldn't find the net. Even when they did score twice, against Reggina, a visiting player was struck by a missile thrown from the crowd and their opponents were awarded a 2-0 win.

Over the entirety of their 77-year history, Parma had never competed in the top flight. Eighth in Serie B, after a 1-0 loss to Cosenza, their chances of making it in 1990 looked remote at best. A fortnight later, they lost at Barletta, another relegation-threatened team.

Then the remarkable happened.

Not only did Parma recover to seal the club's first ever Serie A campaign, but by the end of the decade they had established themselves as one of *calcio*'s powerhouses and won three European trophies – a tally unsurpassed by any club across the continent during the '90s. From unlikely origins emerged one of football's greatest cult teams.

"WHERE ARE WE TRAINING TODAY, GUYS?"

Parma is a provincial city in the north of Italy, with its population of nearly 200,000 people putting it roughly on a par with Colchester or Gateshead. Milan or Turin, it is not. Its football team's golden era had previously come in the 1950s, when they came ninth in Serie B: Parma stayed in the second tier for 11 straight seasons, then returned to the lower leagues before being liquidated in 1968.

Eighteen years later, the reformed club were promoted from Serie C under the guidance of a little-known coach by the name of Arrigo Sacchi, and their rise began. A season later, they shocked Milan in the Coppa Italia – enough to persuade Silvio Berlusconi to hire Sacchi for the Rossoneri. Without him, Parma set up home in Serie B's mid-table, drawing 21 of 38 matches in 1988-89 and netting a paltry 29 goals.

In the summer of 1989, Nevio Scala arrived as boss, having guided Reggina from the third tier to the brink of Serie A. "We started that season with ambitions," remembers Lorenzo Minotti, who had joined Parma in 1987 and became captain in 1989-90, going on to retain the armband for seven years. "We got a new general manager and a new coach, who had done well at Reggina. Up until that point, we had been playing to avoid relegation and develop young players. That year, we aimed for promotion. From the very start, our coach insisted we could do well. We had a great first half of the season."

With four automatic promotion places up for grabs, the Gialloblu sat second in the table at the turn of the year, level on points with Pisa. They had lost just once in their first 18 outings – but then came the goal drought and six defeats in their next seven fixtures. "Nevio Scala brought us a winning mentality and a style of play that players and fans enjoyed," defender Luigi Apolloni tells *FFT*. "All he wanted was for us to be happy. But then we had seven games when we struggled. When our president, Ernesto Ceresini, suddenly passed away following a heart attack, it was a shock for us all."

Eventually, Scala halted the slide. Parma went unbeaten in their last 11 games and climbed back into the automatic promotion spots. In their penultimate encounter of the season, at home to local rivals Reggiana (not to be confused with Reggina), they reached Serie A for the first time in their history, in front of 15,000 fans at the Stadio Ennio Tardini. "Scala told us that we should all enjoy what we were doing," says Apolloni. "When we clinched promotion in the derby, it was such an emotional moment. It was a real shame for Ceresini, though – his dream was to see Parma play in the top flight."

Parma had only finished fourth, behind Torino, Pisa and Cagliari, but they received new investment that summer as Calisto Tanzi, founder of the local Parmalat dairy company, bought shares from the Ceresini family and increased his stake to 45 per cent. For their Serie A bow, the club recruited 20-year-old Tomas Brolin from Swedish side Norrkoping and goalkeeper Claudio Taffarel from Internacional in Brazil.



"THE FIRST TROPHY IS LIKE THE FIRST KISS: YOU NEVER FORGET IT"





"The process of my transfer was unbelievable," Taffarel later revealed to *FFT*. "The 1990 World Cup was over for Brazil and we were on our way back home, waiting for the flight from Milan Malpensa Airport. A guy approached me and said, 'Hey, would you like to play in Italy?' I laughed and said, 'Well, yes, but how?' A week later, my phone rang and I was asked, 'Do you still want to come?' Parmalat representatives flew to Brazil for negotiations, and I joined Parma.

"When I arrived, though, my new team-mates kept asking for my autograph. I got a bit scared about that – I was thinking, 'What kind of club have I come to?' Only one member of the squad had played in Serie A before. We had a clear target in the first season: '*salvezza*'. To avoid relegation."

They avoided it by some distance. After beating Diego Maradona's Napoli in their second home game, Parma ultimately ended up above the reigning champions, as well as several other household names in Juventus, Lazio, Roma and Fiorentina. With Milan banned from Europe as a punishment for their walk-off during a European Cup match at Marseille, Parma's sixth-placed finish was enough to earn them a spot in the following season's UEFA Cup.

"Parmalat were very ambitious," continues Minotti. "To be backed by such an entrepreneur gave us confidence, and we added the right players. Brolin was a champion in the making and Taffarel was a top keeper – and also an opportunity for Parmalat to present their brand in a huge market such as Brazil. Everything was going in one direction, and we rode the wave."

In 1991, Tanzi and Parmalat bought the club outright. The journey was only just beginning.

On their European debut, however, Parma's inexperience told, and they were eliminated in the first round by an 89th-minute CSKA Sofia goal. Their game preparation remained makeshift for much of the '90s. Back-up goalkeeper Marco Ballotta often found himself driving the team bus to training... wherever that was each day. "We didn't have a training facility – every morning, we didn't know where we would be training," Brolin told *FFT*. "We would change at the stadium, then travel in a minibus to this pitch or that pitch, almost a different one each day throughout the winter.

"But Parma was quiet. You could live close to a normal life."

Clockwise from left Taffarel was there to witness the beginning of an era; Parma's fanbase grew and grew; Tanzi sails close to the Vincent Tan look of kit-over-suit; at Wembley to become the Cup Winners' Cup... winners; Thuram, Chiesa, Buffon: not too shabby

TEAM OF THE PEOPLE

Free from the pressures imposed upon Italy's biggest clubs, Parma reached their first ever Coppa Italia final in 1992. Giovanni Trapattoni's Juventus were the favourites, especially after Roberto Baggio's penalty gave them a 1-0 lead from the first leg in Turin. "Juventus represented power, and the history of Italian football," says Minotti. "Until not long before that, we only knew some of their players from the television. But the return leg was fantastic. We played at home in front of a full house, and we had to score two."

And they did, without conceding. "When the trophy was handed over, a childhood dream finally came true," recounts captain Minotti. "It happened in Parma, in our stadium, in front of our supporters. It was crazy and unforgettable."

For Alberto Di Chiara, Parma's long-awaited first major silverware landed in his first campaign at the club, after arriving from Fiorentina. "The first trophy is like the first kiss: you never forget it," he tells *FFT*. "It was very emotional to win that first Coppa Italia."

Apolloni believes that much of their success was down to the unity between players and supporters. "We were such a tight-knit group, and somehow we owed that trophy to the city and our fans," he explains. "When we lost to CSKA Sofia in Europe it was hard to swallow, but our supporters stayed behind and chanted for us that night, to show their gratitude. We would train in a public park in the town centre, and we'd talk to elderly fans there. Families would come, too. We had a really strong bond with the city."

A year later, Parma would taste glory on the European stage. They had added a maverick to their ranks for 1992-93, signing Tino Asprilla from Colombia's Atletico Nacional. "He was our clown in the dressing room, and a fantastic player," Brolin later said. "You never knew what he was going to do. Sometimes that was good, sometimes it wasn't so good – even we didn't know what he was going to do!"

Asprilla curled home a free-kick to end Milan's 57-match unbeaten run in Serie A, securing a surprise victory at San Siro as Parma surged to a third-placed finish in the league. In the Cup Winners' Cup, Asprilla bagged both goals in a semi-final first-leg triumph at Atletico Madrid, which took his team into May 1993's Wembley final against Antwerp. Unfortunately, the 23-year-old wouldn't feature in the showpiece: on a visit to Colombia, he entered into a dispute with a bus driver, booted the door of the coach in anger and injured himself.

The attendance was a mere 37,000 at Wembley, yet the travelling contingent was impressive for a club that had been in Serie B just three years earlier. "Around 15,000 people made the journey from Parma," recalls Minotti. "A few seasons before that, we would play at home in front of 3,000 or 4,000. It was our first European final and it was at Wembley, the temple of football. It was like a film."

Parma's skipper opened the scoring that night, paving the way for a convincing 3-1 win. "That was the most special victory of my time at Parma," adds Minotti. "I scored an important and beautiful goal, and lifted the cup as captain. After we scored the third, we were safe and had time to enjoy the moment. I'll never forget walking up the stairs to collect the trophy, shaking hands with the dignitaries."

Such was the strength of Serie A at the time, Italian clubs won eight European trophies between 1989 and 1993. Incredibly, Parma would reach a European final in three consecutive seasons, becoming an even more dangerous attacking force after they signed Gianfranco Zola in 1993 to link up with Brolin and Asprilla.

"We wanted to attack as often as possible," said Brolin. "Lots of sides in Italy were scared of doing that – it was 0-0 football. It wasn't only Parma fans who liked us; the whole of Italy found us exciting." At the same time, dominating possession was a part of their success. On one occasion, a referee bizarrely awarded a free-kick against Parma during a Serie A fixture, viewing their keep-ball as time-wasting.

Zola netted 18 Serie A goals in his first campaign at the club, second only to Lazio's Beppe Signori. Parma defeated Milan at San Siro to win ▶

"ASPRILLA MISSED THE WEMBLEY FINAL AFTER INJURING HIMSELF BY KICKING A BUS DOOR"





the European Super Cup, then ousted Ajax on the way to their second consecutive Cup Winners' Cup final, only a year before Louis van Gaal's side won the Champions League. But in the final, Parma experienced a frustrating night in Copenhagen and couldn't turn chances into goals, allowing Alan Smith's 20-yard strike to give George Graham's Arsenal a trademark 1-0 win.

"WHERE DO I PARK MY PRIVATE JET?"

A familiar foe faced Parma in the 1995 UEFA Cup Final. "We played Juventus six times that season: twice in the league, twice in the Coppa Italia final and twice in the UEFA Cup final," says Di Chiara. "Juve were a great side – they won the Champions League a year later."

Juve captured the Coppa Italia but Parma lifted the UEFA Cup: Dino Baggio outshone namesake Roberto with the first leg's only goal, then netted the decisive strike in the second leg, too, after Gianluca Vialli had levelled the tie. Unusually, the Bianconeri had opted to play their home leg at San Siro in Milan, 75 miles from Turin, due to poor crowds and a landlord dispute at their unpopular Stadio Delle Alpi.

Parma had just finished third again in Serie A; they had even been top for a period, having added Portugal's Fernando Couto in defence. "The summer after that UEFA Cup final, Juve apparently offered half of Alessandro Del Piero's player licence plus money for me," reveals Parma wing-back Di Chiara. "But Calisto Tanzi said, 'Unless Alberto comes to me and requests to leave, I'll never sell him'. So I stayed."

Parma purchased a 29-year-old Hristo Stoichkov from Barcelona for £6.5 million ahead of the 1995-96 campaign, but the move backfired. "He was a Ballon d'Or winner and is still a friend of mine, but he lived football in a completely different way," admits Minotti. "He arrived on a personal jet, lent by the Bulgarian government, and would only talk at press conferences. We'd never held a press conference before – we would meet the local journalists at the park. Stoichkov was used to a different reality and it brought imbalance to the group. It was hard to slot him into our formation, with Zola and Asprilla. Scala needed to change his setup and the team suffered."

Zola played less regularly and Asprilla soon left for Newcastle, shortly after Brolin had joined Leeds mid-season. Parma came sixth in Serie A and lost to Paris Saint-Germain in the Cup Winners' Cup quarter-finals,



making it their first trophyless campaign in five years. Standards had been raised so high that it spelled doom for Scala as the head coach.

Stoichkov swiftly returned to Barça in 1996 while ex-Parma player Carlo Ancelotti became the new manager, having just taken Reggiana into Serie A in his first season as a coach. He scrapped Scala's 3-5-2 for 4-4-2 and recruited Enrico Chiesa and a young Hernan Crespo to lead the line, meaning Zola was shunted to the left side of midfield before being sold to Chelsea. At the back, Lilian Thuram came in to team up with 1995 recruit Fabio Cannavaro and goalkeeper Gianluigi Buffon, who had made his debut the previous season aged 17.

"Ancelotti had been a successful player and wasn't used to public training sessions, so we practised at a military school," says Apolloni, who was preparing for the 10th of his 13 seasons at Parma (he still holds the club record for most appearances, with 384). The 1996-97 campaign would be the closest Parma came to winning Serie A: they ended it as runners-up, a mere two points behind Juventus, following a showdown fixture at the Stadio Delle Alpi in mid-May. Zinedine Zidane, of all players, ham-fistedly sliced a corner into his own net, but a penalty earned Juve a crucial draw after Pierluigi Collina decided that Cannavaro had felled Christian Vieri. Contact looked minimal.

"The Scudetto would have been *the* title, alongside the Champions League," says Apolloni. "We won every national and international trophy apart from those two. It would have been the perfect way to honour what Calisto Tanzi did for the club and the city."

Second place did propel Parma into the Champions League for the first time ever, but finishing as group runners-up – to holders Borussia Dortmund, no less – didn't guarantee passage to the knockouts then, nor even a UEFA Cup consolation prize. Parma came sixth in Serie A and Ancelotti, who had vetoed a deal to sign Roberto Baggio at the start of the season, believing he wouldn't fit their system, was sacked.

Clockwise from bottom left "We didn't hold press conferences until Stoichkov joined"; the '90s nostalgia hits keep coming; a short-lived but iconic home kit; only Carlo could pull off a bumbag

Albert Malesani was hired from Fiorentina as his replacement, and he quickly reverted to Scala's 3-5-2. Juan Sebastian Veron joined from Sampdoria for £15m to bolster the midfield, for a campaign in which Parma adopted their famous yellow-and-blue-hooped home jersey. They actually wore it for only six seasons, up to 2004, before returning to the largely white home kit they had sported for most of the 1990s.

THE SPIRAL OF DOOM

That Parma's hooped kit became so renowned had plenty to do with the prosperity of the 1998-99 squad, and an iconic team picture taken that season. Seven days after they lifted the Coppa Italia again thanks to victory over Fiorentina, Parma faced Marseille in the UEFA Cup final. The team image snapped prior to kick-off suggests Marseille needn't have bothered showing up. With Buffon, Thuram, Cannavaro, Veron, Dino Baggio, Chiesa and Crespo in a starting XI that would collectively win 780 international caps in their careers, Parma steamrollered l'OM 3-0 to win their third European trophy of the decade. Across the '90s, only Juventus and Inter could match that haul.

But at the start of the 1999-2000 campaign, Parma lost to Rangers in Champions League qualifying after selling Veron and Chiesa. Their replacements, Ariel Ortega and £25m striker Marcio Amoroso, didn't enjoy the same success. The club still finished fifth, then fourth, and even won the Coppa Italia for a third time in 2002 following the arrivals of Hidetoshi Nakata and Hakan Sukur, but they went through a flurry of coaches. When Arrigo Sacchi came back for a second spell, 14 years after departing to Milan, he quit after just three matches citing stress and never managed again.

Buffon and Thuram left for Juventus. Crespo and Cannavaro joined Inter. And catastrophe struck during 2003-04, as Parmalat suffered bankruptcy and the club were declared insolvent. "It was a shock for us all," says Minotti, who was on the club's staff by then. "We finished that season in fifth, but the last six months were difficult."

Somehow, Parma would still have booked a place in the Champions League again had they not lost to Inter in their penultimate fixture. "We missed out because of an Adriano goal," says a rueful Apolloni, who had also returned to the club in an off-field role. "He played for us until January, but we had to sell him due to our financial troubles."

Parma remained in special administration for the next three years. In 2004-05, they narrowly avoided relegation even while reaching a UEFA Cup semi-final. Eventually they succumbed to the drop in 2008, months before Tanzi was imprisoned for fraud. They bounced back to Serie A immediately in 2009 and even qualified for Europe in 2014, but were barred from appearing in the Europa League because of overdue tax debts. Bankruptcy was declared in March 2015.

Scala returned as club president when Parma started afresh in the fourth tier that summer as Parma Calcio 1913, with Apolloni installed as the boss. "A group of local investors took over and we won the title," explains Apolloni proudly. "We went back to professional football and started the journey that restored the club to Serie A inside four years, achieving three consecutive promotions."

However, relegation to Serie B followed in 2021, and after last term's mid-table finish, Parma spent 2022-23 chasing a play-off place with a 45-year-old Buffon in goal, back at the club where he made his debut fully 28 years ago.

"I was so sad about what happened to Parmalat and Calisto Tanzi," says former Parma star Alberto Di Chiara, reflecting on the events of the 2003-04 campaign, which effectively brought a glorious era to a close. Tanzi passed away last year. "Calisto was a fantastic person," continues Di Chiara. "He created the perfect environment to play great football. When Parmalat went bankrupt, it took everything that rotated around it, including the club.

"But all cycles come to an end at some point – it happened with Silvio Berlusconi at Milan, and others. Parma was something special. Eight trophies in 10 years: two UEFA Cups, the European Super Cup, one Cup Winners' Cup, the Coppa Italia three times and a Supercoppa Italiana. What a period that was."

For a club who had never played in Serie A before the 1990s, it was beyond their wildest dreams.

Few stories have captured the imagination like Parma's rise to the upper echelons of European football. For a generation of fans across the continent, a cult team was created that will live on forever.

100 YEARS OF



WEMBLEY

England's national stadium celebrates its centenary in April. Ever since it opened in 1923, it's hosted great football history, from the iconic to the downright weird...

Words Chris Flanagan



BOLTON 2-0 WEST HAM 1923

When Wembley Stadium was first built, it was only due to remain open for a year.

Officially known as the Empire Stadium, it was constructed amid the fields of Wembley Park for the 1924 British Empire Exhibition but was ready ahead of schedule, and so it opened for the FA Cup final on April 28, 1923. The showpiece fixture had previously been held at various venues including The Oval, Crystal Palace and Old Trafford, and Stamford Bridge for the previous three seasons.

Around 53,000 people had turned up to Chelsea's ground to watch Huddersfield beat Preston in the 1922 final. This time, an estimated 250,000 wannabe spectators flooded to the new stadium in north-west London – far more than the official capacity attendance of 126,047, which is still a record at Wembley. King George V's motorcade just about found its way through the hordes; no such luck for the Bolton team, who had to walk the last mile of their journey.

Thousands of ticketless fans climbed over walls to get in and 10,000 had spilled onto the pitch come 3pm, the scheduled kick-off time. Crowds were pushed back by mounted police, one of them riding a light grey horse called Billie, which looked white on Pathé's monochrome footage – hence the White Horse Final, as the match became known.

The game finally started 45 minutes late. Bolton's David Jack scored the stadium's first ever goal within three minutes, when a West Ham player got tangled up with pitchside spectators after taking a throw-in; Jack's shot was so powerful that it knocked out a fan stood right behind the goal. Jack Smith added a second – West Ham complained that the shot had hit the post, but the referee adjudged that it had gone in before being kicked out of the goal by a spectator. Now that *would* be an entertaining VAR interlude.

The match was halted for a time as injured fans were treated, with reports that as many as 1,000 people were wounded that day. MPs blamed hooliganism as Parliament debated whether the disorganised scenes meant that Wembley should never host a football match again. Thankfully, that didn't come to pass.

ENGLAND 1-1 SCOTLAND 1924

In stark contrast to the White Horse Final, only 37,250 people watched Wembley's first ever international match. There was a full First Division fixture list on the same day.

England had already lost to both Ireland and Wales in that year's British Home Championship when Scotland came to town. They drew and the hosts finished bottom.

EALING ASSOCIATION 0-4 IPSWICH 1928

A non-league side set up home at Wembley in the late 1920s. It didn't go well.

Stadium owner Arthur Elvin agreed to rent the venue for four months to an ambitious new club called Argonauts, who wanted to join the Football League. One problem: their application was rejected, so the club never even got started, but they still had a rental agreement to honour. Reigning Southern Amateur League champs Ealing Association moved in instead while their own ground had repairs, and they beat Hastings & St Leonards in their first fixture under the Twin Towers.

Things went downhill after that. Ipswich won the next match 4-0 and Ealing lost six of their eight games at the stadium, then were relegated. Average Wembley attendance: 50.

ARSENAL 2-0 HUDDERSFIELD 1930

In the second half of the 1930 FA Cup Final, a German Zeppelin loomed over Wembley.

The match was briefly halted as the world's biggest airship hovered low. The pilot dipped the passenger ship's nose to salute the king, then headed on towards RAF Cardington in Bedfordshire. Some of the crowd booed – 15 years earlier, Zeppelins had bombed London.

Arsenal went on to claim their first FA Cup, under legendary boss Herbert Chapman, who had joined them *from* Huddersfield in 1925.



Above A spectre from a past that the spectators at Wembley wished they could forget

ENGLAND 0-1 WALES 1940

Global conflict had returned when England hosted Wales in this wartime international.

A reduced attendance of 40,000 spectators was allowed, and the Three Lions fielded several players serving in the armed forces, including Stanley Matthews – stationed with the RAF in Blackpool – and Denis Compton, Arsenal's football/cricket superstar who was working, appropriately, as a gunner. Wales won Wembley's first fixture in almost a year.

GREAT BRITAIN 1-3 YUGOSLAVIA 1948

Wembley Stadium didn't exist when London hosted the Olympics in 1908. Four decades later, it staged the 1948 Games' semi-finals and medal matches. Early rounds had been in stadiums as varied as White Hart Lane, Fratton Park and Dulwich's Champion Hill.

A Great Britain side made up of little-known amateurs had done well to reach the semis under Manchester United boss Matt Busby,

but lost 3-1 to Yugoslavia at Wembley and then, two days later at the same venue, 5-3 to Denmark in the bronze medal match. Gold went to Sweden, led by the famous Gre-No-Li trio – Gunnar Gren, Gunnar Nordahl and Nils Liedholm – who all joined Milan the next year.

BLACKPOOL 4-3 BOLTON 1953

Only one man has ever hit an FA Cup final hat-trick at Wembley. The match was still named after someone else instead.

Stan Mortensen netted thrice as Blackpool dramatically beat Bolton, yet the game was then known as The Matthews Final, after the outstanding Stanley Matthews finally lifted his first major trophy aged 38 (though he'd continue to play for another 12 years). When Mortensen passed away in 1991, some wags dubbed his farewell The Matthews Funeral.

ENGLAND 3-6 HUNGARY 1953

Wembley hosted another high-scoring thriller six months later, albeit a bit more one-sided.

England had been unbeaten at Wembley for 30 years since its opening, until Ferenc Puskas & Co rocked up and stunned 105,000 spectators by charging into a 4-1 lead inside half an hour. En route to an infamous Three Lions defeat in what became known as The Match of the Century, Puskas' dragback for 3-1 so bamboozled Billy Wright that the legendary defender was described as looking like "a fire engine rushing to the wrong fire".

Hungary had 35 shots to England's five, comprehensively winning the all-important xG battle. Leading 6-2 after 53 minutes, the Magyars could have reached double figures.

LONDON XI 3-2 FRANKFURT XI 1955

The first Inter-Cities Fairs Cup took place over the course of three whole seasons from 1955 to 1958, its 12 teams including Inter, Birmingham City and a makeshift London XI.

The UEFA Cup's predecessor originally brought together European cities that hosted trade fairs. After winning 5-0 in Switzerland against a Basel XI, London faced Frankfurt in Wembley's first ever floodlit fixture, with a team of players from Chelsea, Tottenham, Millwall, Fulham, Charlton and Leyton Orient.

Bedford Jezzard scored twice and Fulham team-mate Bobby Robson once, as a 2-0 half-time deficit was turned into a 3-2 win under the lights. It took London 17 months to wrap up their two remaining group-stage fixtures, then another year to play the semis and final, by which time Jezzard had retired. London drew 2-2 with Barcelona at Stamford Bridge, Jimmy Greaves scoring on his club's turf, but lost the return 6-0 at the Camp Nou.

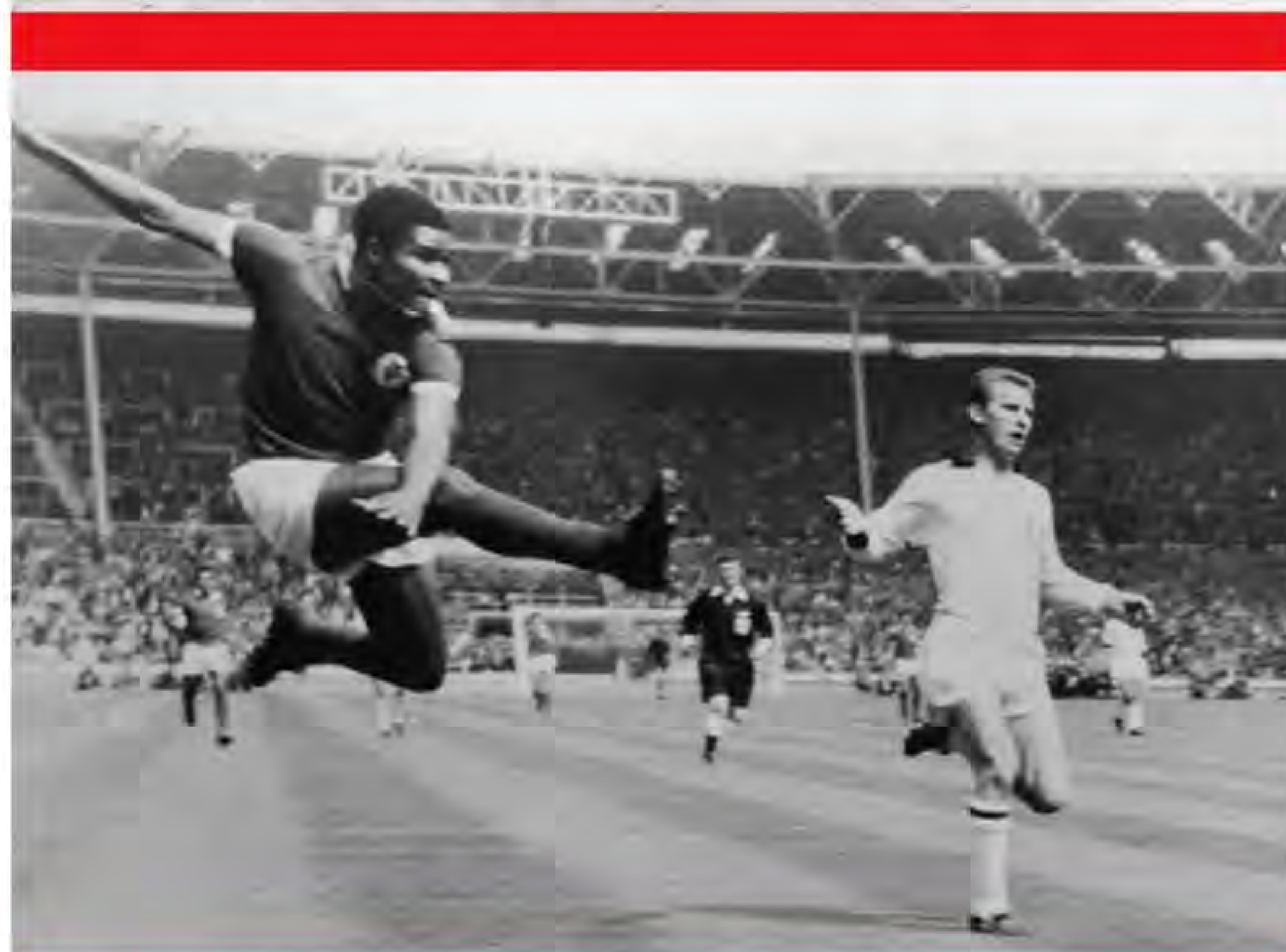
ENGLAND 9-3 SCOTLAND 1961

Goalkeeper Frank Haffey escaped through a window to play for Scotland at Wembley. He must have wished he hadn't bothered.

Worried about the effect that a trip to the bright lights of London might have on an impressionable 22-year-old, Haffey's sister locked him in his bedroom to stop him going. A flawed plan: their Glasgow flat was on the ground floor. He climbed out of the window.

Haffey could do little to prevent England winning 9-3 in his second, and last, outing for Scotland. Not that it got him down – he broke into song in the team bath afterwards, then agreed to pose for press photos on Platform Nine at King's Cross and under Big Ben at 9.03pm. He later moved to Australia and became a singer, comedian and actor.







Top to bottom England stuffed the Scots in '61; Eusebio lets fly; Busby gives his Babes a demo; Wembley's Twin Towers: historic



MILAN 2-1 BENFICA 1963

Only 45,715 fans attended Wembley's first European Cup final – because it was played at 3pm on a Wednesday. Three years after 127,621 were present to witness Real Madrid thrash Eintracht Frankfurt 7-3 at Hampden Park, a more modest crowd watched Benfica try to win a third successive European Cup.

Alas, manager Bela Guttmann had quit after the 1962 final, dramatically declaring, "Not in a hundred years will Benfica ever be European champions again." Eusebio fired them ahead at Wembley, but Milan hit back and their reign came to an end. Still, it's only another 39 years until Bela's curse expires.

WEST HAM 2-0 1860 MUNICH 1965

The only continental triumph in West Ham's history (no, the Intertoto Cup doesn't count) came just 12 miles from Upton Park.

In front of nearly 98,000 spectators, Alan Sealey was the unlikely hero in the European Cup Winners' Cup final, notching both goals having scored only three times previously in the entire campaign. A year after lifting the FA Cup, Bobby Moore held the trophy aloft.

"Who knows: in just over a year's time, he might be standing on the same spot with the World Cup in his hands..." commentator Kenneth Wolstenholme mused.

Maybe, Ken. Maybe.

ENGLAND 4-2 WEST GERMANY 1966

West Germany lost out in a rival bid to host the 1966 World Cup – then lost the final, too.

Wembley staged nine games throughout the tournament; it would have been 10, but France vs Uruguay was moved to White City to avoid a clash with a greyhound meeting.

Just under 97,000 fans gathered for the final, the highest attendance for a World Cup showpiece on European soil – unsurprising, when you consider that everybody you know from that era claims to have been there. The match has a legacy in Germany as well as in England: after Geoff Hurst's controversial second goal, any shot that bounces off the bar and lands on the goal-line is known in Germany as a 'Wembley-Tor', ie a 'Wembley Goal'. Fair enough, really.

MANCHESTER UNITED 4-1 BENFICA 1968

Bobby Charlton hadn't found the net in eight appearances during Manchester United's run to the European Cup final, but he popped in a pair when it mattered most.

Two years after helping England to win the World Cup, he was back at Wembley beating Eusebio once again – Charlton had bagged a brace against Portugal in the World Cup semi-final – as Manchester United became the first English side to lift the European Cup. Eusebio played four matches at Wembley in his career, and lost all four of them. ▸

SWINDON 3-1 ARSENAL 1969

After six years of two-legged showdowns, the League Cup final was moved to Wembley in 1967 – and within two years, it had been the venue for two major upsets.

First, QPR became the first Third Division side ever to win a major trophy, as a young Rodney Marsh helped them to beat top-flight West Bromwich Albion. Then Swindon, also of the third tier, improbably defeated Arsenal. Don Rogers scored twice in extra time as the Gunners, who'd called off their last game due to flu, got stuck in the mud after a week of rain had followed an England international. "The pitch was really bad," Rogers said later, "but it was in good nick compared to ours."

AJAX 2-0 PANATHINAIKOS 1971

Wembley was the venue for the first of Ajax's three successive European Cup final wins in the 1970s. It was the culmination of Rinus Michels' Total Football project, as the Dutch side conquered Europe for the first time; job done, the manager then went to Barcelona.

The fabulously-named Dick van Dijk gave Michels' charges a fifth-minute lead, leaving the Greeks fearing diagnosis: murder. A rout didn't materialise, although Johan Cruyff did tee up Arie Haan late on to make it 2-0.

THE THREE 2-0 THE SIX 1973

The UK, Denmark and the Republic of Ireland all joined the European Economic Community on New Year's Day, 1973. Two days later, they celebrated with a special all-star match.

Coached by Sir Alf Ramsey, players from the three new members, including Bobby Moore, Pat Jennings, Johnny Giles, Peter Lorimer and Henning Jensen but no Welshmen, took on a team of superstars from Belgium, France, Italy, the Netherlands, Luxembourg – cruelly unrepresented – and West Germany, the six founder members of the EEC (later to become the European Union). Messrs Beckenbauer, Neeskens, Zoff, Muller et al were defeated in front of a sparse crowd on Bobby Charlton's final appearance at Wembley.

Fifty years later, we're yet to see the Brexit All-Star Game we were promised on that bus.

ENGLAND 1-1 POLAND 1973

The Three Lions had never failed to qualify for a World Cup... then Jan Tomaszewski arrived.

Having gone down 2-0 in Katowice, Sir Alf's squad needed to defeat Poland at Wembley. They had annihilated Austria 7-0 without the scapegoated Bobby Moore; now they just had to get past "a circus clown in gloves", as TV pundit Brian Clough called Tomaszewski.

But Tomaszewski was brilliant. Allan Clarke rectified Peter Shilton's error, yet even with 39 shots to Poland's two, and 23 corners to their none, England took a custard pie to the face.

ENGLAND 1-2 SCOTLAND 1977

In 1975, Scotland lost 5-1 at Wembley. In '77 they wrought vengeance on its woodwork.



Against an England side about to miss out on the World Cup again, Ally MacLeod's men showed why they *were* going to Argentina, beating the Auld Enemy through goals from Gordon McQueen and Kenny Dalglish (both, coincidentally, had daughters who'd become Sky Sports presenters). Cue a pitch invasion by thousands of jubilant Scots, featuring Rod Stewart, a broken crossbar and a 20-year-old Gordon Strachan on honeymoon, after he'd moved his wedding forward for the match.

In the aftermath, England manager Don Revie gave up his post and his reputation by leaving to manage the United Arab Emirates.

LIVERPOOL 1-0 CLUB BRUGGE 1978

Scots enjoyed more Wembley success in '78, helping Liverpool to retain the European Cup.

Twelve months after the Reds defeated Borussia Monchengladbach in Rome, a young Alan Hansen started in defence against Club Brugge in place of Tommy Smith – ruled out after dropping a pickaxe on his foot, naturally – while Graeme Souness set up Dalglish to score at Wembley again with a deft little dink.

Above Van Dijk heads Ajax into the lead against Panathinaikos **Below** Villa's opening goal in the 1981 FA Cup Final replay was more emphatic than hypnotic

TOTTENHAM 3-2 MANCHESTER CITY 1981

The stadium's first ever FA Cup final replay featured an individual goal for the ages.

Incredibly, given that penalty shootouts weren't a thing back then, only one cup final replay had been required over the previous 58 years, and Chelsea and Leeds had played theirs at Old Trafford in 1970. Wembley later held replays in 1982, 1983, 1990 and 1993, but none produced a goal as special as Ricky Villa's slaloming winner against Manchester City, a dribble every bit as silky as his beard.

SOUTHEAST CARDINALS 1-0 MILLWALL LIONESSES 1987

Fully 64 years after Wembley opened, it held its maiden 11-a-side women's – or girls' – football fixture (hockey had got there first).

The visit of Cincinnati's Southeast Cardinals, reigning Under-14s Ohio state champions, was part of the London International Football Festival, featuring teams from locations as varied as Armenia and Vietnam. Every other game took place on a municipal playing field in nearby Northwick Park, but 3,000 people made the most of the free admission at Wembley to see a Millwall youth team face the Cardinals over two 15-minute halves.

The pitch probably couldn't have handled much longer than that: it was still recovering from four consecutive nights of Genesis gigs.

NOTTINGHAM FOREST 0-0 SHEFFIELD WEDNESDAY 1988

The Football League's centennial tournament at Wembley had a curious selection of teams.

Following on from an all-star match that pitted a Football League XI against the Rest of World (including Diego Maradona, booed



mercilessly after the Hand of God incident), the Mercantile Credit Football Festival had been intended as a six-a-side competition between all 92 clubs. It became an 11-a-side event featuring 16 outfits from across the four divisions, invited based on league points.

And so fourth-tier Tranmere joined the likes of Liverpool and Manchester United at Wembley, in a two-day April event with clubs playing two 40-minute games on Saturday, then semi-finals – which featured Tranmere, to their (Mercantile) credit – and the final over 60 minutes on Sunday. Brian Clough didn't even turn up for the first day, but his Nottingham Forest side bagged the cup with a shootout win in front of just 17,000 fans.

ENGLAND WOMEN 0-2 SWEDEN WOMEN 1989

England's women also made an appearance at the Mercantile Credit Football Festival. They were due to play a 30-minute match against the Netherlands but instead met the Republic of Ireland after the Dutch pulled out, insulted by the amount of game time on offer.

The Lionesses had to wait another year for their first full international at Wembley. At long last, they lost to Sweden, as a warm-up to England's men drawing 0-0 with Chile.

CAMBRIDGE 1-0 CHESTERFIELD 1990

The Football League debuted end-of-season play-offs in 1987, but the first three years' finals were played over two legs before they were shifted to one-off ties at the national stadium on the May Bank Holiday weekend.

The first one was a Fourth Division play-off final involving Cambridge and Chesterfield. In a duel between a young Dion Dublin and a younger Sean Dyche, Dublin got the only goal, earning promotion for John Beck's U's.

BARCELONA 1-0 SAMPDORIA 1992

Barcelona's long wait to win a European Cup ended at Wembley in 1992, manager Johan Cruyff leading his Dream Team to glory in the stadium where he had become a continental champion for the first time with Ajax.

Ronald Koeman's extra-time free-kick was enough to defeat the Sampdoria of Roberto Mancini and Gianluca Vialli, prompting Barça president Joan Gaspart to fulfil a promise and have a 4am dip in a nippy River Thames.









Top to bottom Try being as cool as Johan Cruyff – it just can't be done; cheers for heroes dressed in grey; Batigol buries Arsenal; "Sorry, Dychey..."

NOTTS COUNTY 2-1 ASCOLI 1995

A year before Oliver Bierhoff got the winner in the final of Euro 96, he was losing to Notts County at the very same venue. The German joined Ascoli in 1991, only for them to drop into Serie B and end up in the Anglo-Italian Cup, facing clubs from England's second tier.

The relaunched competition had a final at Wembley in each of its four seasons. In 1993, Cremonese beat Derby, then Gheorghe Hagi helped Brescia to defeat Notts County, just months before he was named in the World Cup's team of the tournament. Notts County avenged that defeat against Bierhoff's Ascoli, and finally Vincenzo Montella scored a bicycle kick for Genoa in a 1996 win over Port Vale – a sentence so weird that it was immediately decided to cancel the tournament forever.

ENGLAND 0-0 COLOMBIA 1995

Missing USA 94 and qualifying automatically for Euro 96 as hosts meant England played a *lot* of friendlies in the mid-90s. Rene Higuita provided a reason to remember one, at least.

Five years after his madcap Italia 90 antics, the Colombian goalkeeper spent most of the pre-match warm-up at Wembley testing out a scorpion kick. Instead of catching the ball as any sane person would, he'd acrobatically leap and try to volley it away with his heels.

He then had the audacity to attempt it during the match, from a misplaced Jamie Redknapp chip. He succeeded, too – although the flag was up for offside, so it technically wasn't a save. Sorry, Rene, have another go.

ENGLAND 1-1 GERMANY 1996

"Achtung! Surrender – for you Fritz, ze Euro 96 Championship is over!" declared the *Mirror*'s front page, classily, ahead of England's home semi-final against Germany. Complaints forced editor Piers Morgan to abandon plans to send a tank to the offices of German paper *Bild*, and a Spitfire over the Germany squad's training ground. Depressingly, this isn't a joke.

England were on a wave of optimism after a 4-1 win over the Dutch, but the dream died as Andreas Kopke saved Gareth Southgate's penalty. "Football did come home," sighed *Three Lions* star Frank Skinner, "but someone parked a big Audi across the driveway".

Some fans, making their way home after the match, let their frustration get the better of them. When their train pulled in at New Southgate in north London, they got off and smashed the station sign. That showed him.

ARSENAL 0-1 FIORENTINA 1999

Arsenal's decision to move their Champions League home fixtures to Wembley for two seasons was unpopular... and unsuccessful.

The club opted for the switch when they reached the rebranded European Cup for the first time, explaining that its regulations for taller advertising hoardings pitchside might reduce Highbury's capacity by up to 6,000.

Fans were disappointed but, nonetheless, crowds north of 73,000 went to Wembley. Arsenal drew 1-1 with Dynamo Kyiv and lost at home to Lens to exit at the group phase in 1998-99, then went out at the same stage again a season later after Gabriel Batistuta's thunderbolt gave Fiorentina a narrow victory.

ENGLAND 0-1 GERMANY 2000

Four years on from scuppering England's hopes of Euro 96 success, Germany ruined their Wembley farewell, too.

Three Lions boss Kevin Keegan seemed to know what was coming, declaring in his inimitable way before the World Cup qualifier that, "I could be known as that man – the last man to lose at Wembley. I don't want to be known as that man."

But he was that man. On a drenched pitch, Didi Hamann's absurdly long-range effort slipped through David Seaman and Keegan promptly resigned in a toilet cubicle.

Wembley was demolished less promptly: the bulldozers rolled in a full two years after Hamann's free-kick did the same (by way of contrast, Tottenham began knocking down White Hart Lane in 2017 the day after its final match). Eventually, however, England had a new home on the same hallowed ground... ▶

ENGLAND U21 3-3 ITALY U21 2007

When the new Wembley Stadium eventually opened seven years later, Nigel Pearson was managing England. Well, England Under-21s.

The redevelopment wasn't supposed to take so long; however, delays and spiralling costs were never out of the news cycle. The old arena's Twin Towers were demolished in 2003 – the same year that the new venue was meant to be completed. Finally in 2007, following an informal match between the stadium owners and the builders in order to check the floodlights, and then a charity fixture used as a test event with only Brent residents invited, the stadium's first official game saw the Three Lions' under-21s take on their Italian counterparts.

England conceded after 29 seconds. Many of the 55,700 spectators present – capacity was still reduced as part of a safety certificate ramp-up – hadn't yet taken their seats under the shiny new arch when Giampaolo Pazzini beat Lee Camp from long range, en route to a hat-trick. Fortunately for the hosts, goals from David Bentley, Wayne Routledge and Matt Derbyshire spared England's blushes and the new home any ostrich-based rants.

ENGLAND 2-3 CROATIA 2007

The England senior team's last game at the old Wembley ended with misery in the rain, and it didn't take long for them to experience deja vu at the new gaff.

Five months after their first match at the stadium, a 1-1 friendly draw with Brazil, all they needed was a draw at home to Croatia to reach Euro 2008. What could go wrong?

Quite a lot, in fact. With Wayne Rooney, Michael Owen, Rio Ferdinand, John Terry, Ashley Cole and Gary Neville all absent, the Three Lions went behind when Scott Carson, winning only his second cap, blundered to let Niko Kranjcar score. "More Frank Carson than Scott," grouched Mark Lawrenson, hilariously.

Steve McClaren watched aghast as Mladen Petric's rocket rendered England's subsequent comeback meaningless. He was sacked a day later, having at least managed to pop to the toilet post-match without resigning.

BARCELONA 3-1 MANCHESTER UNITED 2011

What's the greatest ever team performance in a final? The Azteca in Mexico provided the stage for Brazil's 1970 World Cup Final masterclass against Italy. Wembley saw the pinnacle of arguably the best club team ever.

Pep Guardiola's Barcelona swept all before them during his four years at the helm, and never were they more impressive than in their 2011 Champions League Final against Manchester United. In a comprehensive victory, Pedro, Lionel Messi and David Villa scored from three of Barça's 12 shots on target; United had one on target – Rooney's equaliser – and just four shots of any kind, primarily because they couldn't get the ball.

Some 19 years after becoming a European champion with Barcelona at Wembley as a player, Pep had done the same as a coach.

GREAT BRITAIN WOMEN 1-0 BRAZIL WOMEN 2012

Before the 2012 London Olympics, much of the football focus was on Team GB having a men's team, featuring five Welshmen and captained by Ryan Giggs, who'd retired from international duty in 2007. Thankfully, it was the women's team who left a greater legacy.

While the men's only match at Wembley saw them defeat the United Arab Emirates 3-1, before they succumbed to South Korea in Cardiff, the women captured hearts by beating Brazil at England's national stadium in front of a crowd of more than 70,000 eager fans, thanks to a Steph Houghton goal.

Though they didn't quite make it back to Wembley for the final – beaten in the last eight by Canada, in Coventry of all places – the win over Brazil helped to accelerate the rise of the women's game on British shores.





TOTTENHAM 1-0 ARSENAL 2018

Tottenham set an attendance record when they played their Champions League fixtures at Wembley in 2016-17, and another when they moved there on a more regular basis.

Taking advantage of the national stadium's biggest capacity, Spurs moved their European matches to the venue in White Hart Lane's final campaign, and 85,512 supporters saw them lose to Bayer Leverkusen – the biggest ever gate for a home club game in England.

After White Hart Lane was demolished, Spurs played all of their home matches at Wembley for 20 months. The 83,222-strong crowd that watched them beat Arsenal in the North (West) London Derby is the Premier

League's record attendance, and won't be topped unless anybody else moves there.

It was also just 38 short of the top-flight record, set when Manchester United hosted Arsenal at Maine Road in 1948 while Old Trafford underwent wartime bombing repairs.

NORTHAMPTON 4-0 EXETER 2020

Three months after the COVID-19 pandemic halted football, an empty Wembley Stadium reopened with the Football League play-offs.

In eerie near-silence, Northampton gubbed Exeter 4-0 in the League Two play-off final at the end of June. Wycombe won the League One showpiece a fortnight later and then, on a Tuesday night in early August, Fulham beat Brentford 1-0 in the Championship final with a divine Joe Bryan free-kick.

Some Wembley fixtures were postponed for a whole year due to the disruption. The 2020 and 2021 Football League Trophy finals were held on the same weekend in March 2021, two months before the 2020 FA Trophy Final took place – a delay so long that winners Harrogate, having almost completed their maiden Football League season, technically weren't eligible to take part in it any more.



Left "I must go now. My planet needs me back." **Top** England's women restored pride after 2021 **Above** The 4-0 play-off defeat stunned Exeter fans into silence

ENGLAND 1-1 ITALY 2021

Wembley had been due to host three fixtures at Euro 2020. In the end, it staged eight.

Originally awarded just the semis and final, it added three group games and a last-16 tie after the building of Brussels' Eurostadium was delayed (and later shelved altogether). When Dublin also withdrew due to COVID restrictions, another last-16 tie was switched to Wembley, handing its owners crucial home advantage for their win over Germany. In all, 17 of the 18 matches played by England in their three most successful tournaments – 1966, 1996 and 2021 – were at Wembley.

And things looked rosy when England beat Denmark to reach their first final since 1966. The day itself, however, was a nightmare. In dangerous scenes, hundreds of England fans broke into the stadium without tickets, then manager Gareth Southgate lost in a penalty shootout once again – a sight more painful, even, than the supporter who put a lit flare up his backside in Leicester Square.

But the final brought redemption for Italy manager Roberto Mancini and his assistant, the late Gianluca Vialli: 29 years after losing the European Cup final with Sampdoria at Wembley, they were continental champions.

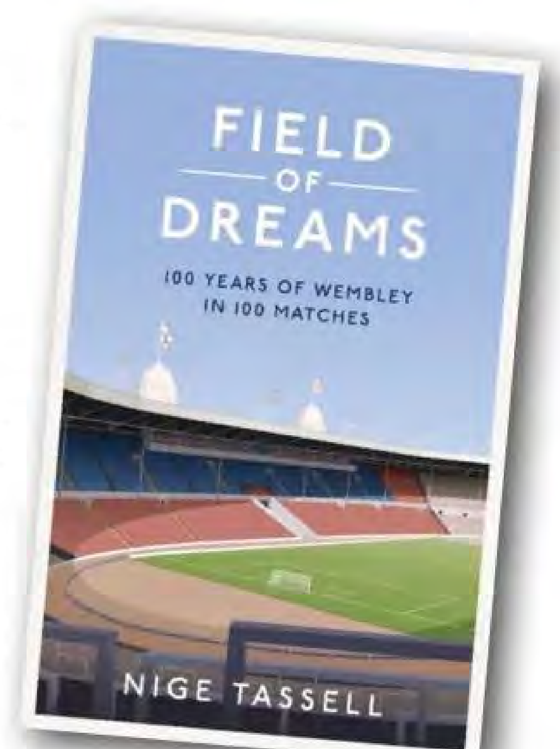
ENGLAND WOMEN 2-1 GERMANY WOMEN 2022

A year later, England's women cleared that last hurdle. Only 35 years earlier, Wembley had never held a women's football match. Now it welcomed a sell-out crowd of 87,192, the highest ever attendance for the final of a men's or women's European Championship, to see the Lionesses win a first major trophy.

In a gripping encounter against Germany (who else?), punctuated by Jill Scott telling opponent Sydney Lohmann to "f**k off, you f**king prick", England won 2-1 in extra time.

In 100 years, rarely has Wembley seen such joyous scenes at the final whistle.

To read about many more famous games from the history of England's national stadium, buy Nige Tassell's new book, 'Field of Dreams: 100 Years of Wembley in 100 Matches' – available now (Simon & Schuster)



THE MADDEST

"So this is the catapult they'll use to propel the dice onto the field. Over there, that's the cannon they fire the ball from, to start the match. And then, for the final, there will be a tightrope walker who drops the ball from over the centre of the pitch."

FourFourTwo have arrived pitchside at Atletico Madrid's impressive Metropolitano home and things have already taken a turn for the weird. We are speaking to Alberto Lambea, our helpful guide for the finals event of the Kings and Queens Leagues. Set up by Barcelona stalwart Gerard Pique, it is akin to The Hundred, only even more outlandish than its cricket equivalent.

The seven-a-side football tournament, which features legends of the game, social media stars and every daft idea you could possibly think of, has become a massive hit in the Spanish-speaking world since its launch on January 1. Less than three months later, it had grown so enormous that 92,522 spectators crammed into the Camp Nou to watch its first finals day, despite the players on the pitch previously being virtual unknowns.

Tomorrow, the Metropolitano will be close to capacity for an eight-hour, six-match epic, including performances from pop stars and a penalty shootout with Iker Casillas.

Before then, we're here to meet Pique himself, who retired from playing last November after a career that gave him a World Cup, a European Championship, four Champions Leagues, nine La Liga titles – the lot. The 36-year-old could have just put his feet up. Instead, he has ploughed his focus into Kosmos Holding, the company he founded in 2017 with a group of businessmen including the head of Japanese firm Rakuten, then Barcelona's shirt sponsor.

A year later, they agreed a deal worth more than £2 billion to transform tennis' Davis Cup from its conventional format into an 18-team finals event in Madrid. That endured mixed success, and the partnership was cut short this January. Kosmos also helped to convert Spanish football's Super Cup into a four-team contest, played in Saudi Arabia.

Given the traditions of both events, those moves were controversial, but Kosmos has been better received as innovators in other areas. Two years ago, Pique launched the first Balloon World Cup, a bizarre competition that ▸

LEAGUE ON EARTH



A shedload of wacky ideas have made Gerard Piqué's Kings and Queens Leagues a hit in Spain. FFT heads to finals day in Madrid to talk to the man himself and find out what the hell is going on

Words Chris Flanagan

involves players from 32 countries trying to stop a balloon from hitting the floor. "The day we came up with that, it was like we were high!" Pique recalls to us, laughing. "That was a new sport we created after seeing a viral video between two brothers in the US. We've already done two World Cups and this year we're thinking about maybe a third."

Pique and Kosmos also bought FC Andorra back in 2018. "I'm very passionate about the things we do at Kosmos – I try to take our projects as high as possible," he explains. "We have taken FC Andorra from the fifth division to the second division in Spain. Now we're fighting to be promoted to La Liga. Last season we finished seventh, one spot outside the play-offs. I'm convinced we will fight to be there one day."

Like the Balloon World Cup, the Kings League was devised with help from pal Ibai Llanos, Spain's most famous social media influencer, who has 15 million followers on Twitch. "I went to lunch with Ibai last July and the idea of the Kings League appeared in my head – he liked it a lot, so we started to work on it," continues Pique. "The truth is, I didn't know what I wanted to do when I retired, but this idea appeared and now here we are. My career was over and you have to accept that; I'm very proud of it, but life goes on and you have to focus on other things. Starting something from scratch is difficult, but we had the tools to do it."

Combining his status within football with Ibai's online influence proved powerful. "We started to find the presidents who would own the clubs," says Pique. The Kings League has 12 teams, most of them headed by a social media star from Spain or Latin America. "That was key," he adds, "because they have enormous communities and they brought a lot of those people with them. We wanted to lure a really big audience right from day one, and we did."

With fixtures streamed live on YouTube, the first matchday on January 1 – featuring half a dozen games at a Powerleague-type indoor arena in Barcelona and a tiny stand for spectators – attracted a peak audience of 780,000. The second matchday peaked at 945,000 when one team fielded a masked player known only as 'Enigma', described by Pique as a La Liga player who didn't want to reveal his true identity, prompting fevered speculation and guesswork from Isco to Denis Suarez. On matchday three, viewership reached 1.3 million.

"WHO THE HELL IS NANO MESA?"

The league's unusual rules, voted for on social media, also helped to catch attention. Matches are two halves of 20 minutes on a small-sized pitch. Normal league fixtures start water polo-style: each team lines up on their goal-line before charging towards the ball on the centre spot. Teams can play one 'secret weapon' per match, picking a card at random – options range from an immediate penalty kick to an opposition player being removed for two minutes, or goals scored in the next two minutes counting double.

La Liga chief Javier Tebas described it as 'a circus', but it was never aimed at him – the main audience is aged 15 to 24, and the league has partnerships with major brands including Adidas and McDonald's. "We don't want to be compared with traditional football or La Liga – we're a completely different product for a different audience," says Pique. "Maybe Javier isn't a fan, but there's a young audience out there that's crazy about the Kings League. The event at the Camp Nou was a big success: we didn't expect 93,000 people after three months of competition. Then, in May, we started the Queens League, investing in women's football.

"There's a need in the market where the traditional sports, and not just football... I'm not saying they are boring, but they're long events where nothing special happens. Football is 90 minutes long and the game sometimes finishes 0-0. The way the new generation consumes their sport is closer to entertainment. The idea was to create a product that was sport but entertainment at the same time.

"There's a video game element, too, as we do things like throwing a dice before the last two minutes of the first half and if the dice lands on a three, the game is three versus three for two minutes. Those things really engage the new generation. They're craving something different."

Parents and older viewers have also been engaged by the involvement of legends such as Casillas and Sergio Aguero, presidents of two of the teams. Aguero has even played in some matches, striding on for his debut in a clown outfit before revealing his identity.

Enigma turned out to be ex-Cadiz forward Nano Mesa, underwhelmingly, but Javier Hernandez made a one-off appearance on launch day, followed by cameos for Javier Saviola, Joan Capdevila, Djibril Cisse, Andrea Pirlo, Andriy Shevchenko and Ronaldinho, who drew an audience of 2.1 million on the day the Brazilian played. "I asked them to play and they really liked the project," says Pique. "Ronaldinho enjoyed it a lot. Having a Ballon d'Or winner playing was amazing, and then Shevchenko – another Ballon d'Or winner – and Andrea Pirlo, as well as Kun Aguero and Iker Casillas."

Neymar has even expressed an interest in getting involved as a president. What about an appearance from Lionel Messi one day? "Why not? It would be so fun!" says Pique, adding with a laugh, "But I think he's been very busy since the World Cup!"

Pique, who emphasises that he hasn't had any conversations with Messi on the topic, hasn't appeared on the pitch, either.

"Once," he adds, "we put a card into the secret weapons and if they took that card at random, they could use me to play on their team. But they didn't pick that card and they didn't know I was one of the options, because it was secret. After that, I decided not to put myself as a secret weapon again, because all day I'd been thinking about whether I had to play or not! I prefer to say, 'I'm not playing; I'm the league president and I'm enjoying it a lot from the outside'."











"IT'S FOOTBALL WITH BOARD GAME RULES – EVEN AS A PLAYER, SOMETIMES YOU'RE LIKE, 'WHAT'S GOING ON?'"

It's already been announced that another league will launch soon in Latin America, based in Mexico with Chicharito as one of the club presidents, also including Spanish-speaking teams from the US and South America. "We're thinking about expansion," says Pique. "For 2024, we have plans for Latin America and other countries. It's key that those countries love football and have a gigantic community of streamers. Latin America knows the product well. After that, the idea is to launch in the US, UK, Germany, Italy – those kinds of places. In 2025, I'd love to go to the US and the UK.

"A finals day at Wembley would be pretty special. And why not? Dreams come true."

IKER CASILLAS: SECRET JOURNALIST

After chatting with us, Pique accompanies the presidents of all 24 Kings and Queens League teams at a press event, streamed to 200,000 people. "When Gerard first began talking about the project and the secret weapon cards, we thought it was a crazy idea," Ibai, president of the Porcinos team, admits to *FFT*. "But then we thought about it a second time, and it started to become a reality. I love football and love managing teams, because I already had an eSports team, so it totally works for me."

Colombian video game YouTuber Juan Guarnizo is the leader of the Aniquiladores team. "I've spent a number of years creating internet content; I didn't know very much about football, but now I love it," he says.

Clockwise from top Pique, Kun, Casillas and the rest of the club presidents; Iker tried his hand at reporting; fans packed into the Metropolitano; Shevchenko and Pirlo joined in the fun; social media colossus Llanos helped to create the tournament



Like Ibai's team, his side is one of the four to have made it through to finals day, after an 11-match regular campaign and then a series of play-off games, all taking place at the indoor arena in Barcelona.

The Kings League follows an Apertura and Clausura format more common in Argentina or Mexico. The Camp Nou event in March was the finals day of the first half of the season; this event in Madrid rounds off the second half, and includes the Queens League finals for the first time. "We're making history," says streamer Esperanza Borras, invited by Guarnizo to become president of sister team Aniquiladoras in the Queens League. "My mother played for Spain's women's team. At the Camp Nou finals day, I took two penalties in front of 93,000 people and missed both! I was nervous."

During a relaxed press conference, Casillas' presence is kept as a surprise. He sneaks in at the back of the auditorium to pose as a journalist asking a question, before joining the other presidents on stage. "My friend Gerard called me one day and said, 'We have a project that you have to sign up for'," the 42-year-old tells *FFT*. "But I didn't know what he was talking about! I said, 'Tell me what it is.' When he explained it, I saw something fun. In 48 hours, I got involved with all of these wonderful people who have shown me a different world. Because of my age and circumstances, I hadn't seen it, but now I'm getting to know it and it's been a wonderful experience. When I go to different parts of Spain, everyone talks to me about the Kings League and Queens League."

Aguero soon arrives as well, and the eight teams involved in the finals are also in the room. Most of the players have come from regional leagues after applying to take part. "You're here from the UK?" Ximel Bladh asks after approaching us once the press event is over. She's a Swedish defender for Queens League team Porcinas, and is surprised that anyone from an English-speaking country would be here, such is the Spanish-language bubble the league has existed in.

"I share clips with people in Sweden, but everything is in Spanish," the 37-year-old explains. "I came to Spain 10 years ago; prior to that, I played professionally in Russia and Cyprus. I found out about the Queens League, signed up, got an invitation to a trial, then I was in.

"It's so different to the football I've played before – it's football with board game rules. Even as a player, sometimes I'm like, 'What's going on? I'm not following!' But it has been amazing. I'm so excited about tomorrow – we went to have a look at the stadium earlier and it's so big."

ACTIVATE THE CATAPULT

On matchday, the Metropolitano is buzzing with people who have travelled from far and wide. Plenty are in their twenties and thirties, and many younger fans wear replica shirts of the teams involved – mostly supporting the side of their favourite streamer. "My first team, Saiyans, were eliminated in the last round, but Porcinos is my second team," says 15-year-old David, who is wearing the shirt of Ibai's side. He's travelled from Barcelona ▸

with family, meeting Madrid-based friends at the stadium. Asked whether they prefer the Kings League or La Liga, his 13-year-old mate answers immediately. "Kings League," he says. "It's more fun."

Outside the ground, we meet visitors from Barcelona who enjoyed the Camp Nou event so much that they came to Madrid, including a mother and 11-year-old daughter who's wearing a shirt of the xBuyer team. Amid the crowds, a chap walks past holding a giant cardboard cutout of Shakira's face, as a joke aimed at Pique, whose relationship with the singer ended last year.

Inside the Metropolitano, Pique is perched on one of several pitchside sofas ready for the pre-show, soon joined by all of the team presidents, driven into the arena on top of an armoured vehicle the size of a tank. Some stand on the pitch as motocross riders drive up a ramp and do acrobatic jumps over their heads. After that, Casillas goes in goal and attempts to save penalties from social media stars. Two singers perform, one entering the stadium with the teams on two open-top buses, because she is also a player today for Queens League side xBuyer.

Like Casillas' outfit, 1K FC, Aguero's side, Kunisports, didn't get through to the finals day. He slinks in unannounced once the first match is underway: the Kings League semi-final between Aniquiladores and El Barrio. It commences with the ball being fired out of a cannon, as we were warned. Unsurprisingly, no one fancies heading it.

Despite the weirdness, people take it very seriously. El Barrio appeal for a penalty with all the vigour of a Champions League fixture, the coach goes nuts when they don't get it, and supporters in the stands whistle their disapproval at the referee. With 57,326 fans present, the stadium isn't far off full capacity.

The game is soon halted as Aniquiladores draw a card that gives them a free penalty, only for them to miss the spot-kick, before Kevin-Prince Boateng turns up to operate the catapult. The giant dice lands on a five, so it's five-on-five for the final two minutes of the half. Play restarts with the ball on the centre spot and both teams running towards it from the goal-line. As they meet, a brutal sliding challenge leaves an Aniquiladores player in agony. Eventually, he's OK.

An own goal finally breaks the deadlock, celebrated as if Aniquiladores have just won the World Cup, and with three minutes left their president, Guarnizo, is summoned to the pitch to take a penalty that will make the score 2-0. The YouTuber warned us he wasn't a football expert and he scuffs it hopelessly wide, Diana Ross-style, before trudging off embarrassed. El Barrio's streamer president, Adri Contreras, then comes on, looking like he's more familiar with a football. He slots home his penalty to take the game to 1-1.

All square at full-time, the match goes to a penalty shootout in the mould of 1990s MLS games, with players dribbling from the halfway line. Aniquiladores' woes continue: one goal is disallowed because the player started dribbling ahead of the starter buzzer sounding, while another player is timed out

















"ASKED IF HE PREFERS THE KINGS LEAGUE OR LA LIGA, A FAN'S 13-YEAR-OLD PAL ANSWERS. "KINGS LEAGUE," HE SAYS. "IT'S MORE FUN"

shortly before his shot hits the net. El Barrio triumph, prompting rapturous celebrations.

Next it's semi-final two: Ibai's Porcinos vs xBuyer. The score is 1-1 when Manolo – the legendary drummer and Spanish national team supporter – operates the catapult and the dice lands on one, to huge cheers. The next two minutes are one versus one: neither player can use their hands and they can only shoot from the centre circle. It's a sensation. Porcinos' Hugo Fraile fires two rockets into the top corner, xBuyer also net twice to make it 3-3, and each side's presidents celebrate by yelling at the crowd, whipping everyone into a frenzy. It's all a bit WWE, but it is very entertaining. Trailing 4-3, Ibai strolls on to leather home a penalty and leave this game level. xBuyer win the shootout.

"MY HERO IS RORY DELAP"

Within minutes, the first Queens League semi-final has begun. Curiously, two of the game's first three goals are scored by men: several Queens League sides have a female president but Las Troncas and xBuyer's female team are each affiliated with male streamers, who briefly take to the field to convert penalties. The tie is again level going into the final two minutes, when goals count double, and Las Troncas notch to win 5-3.

That double-goals rule proves even more influential in semi-final two when Porcinas

Clockwise from top Kings League winners xBuyer; Pio (white) tasted Queens League glory; xBuyer seal the deal; singers, tightrope walkers and Sergio selfies kept the 60,000 crowd occupied; Pique's big prize



lead 2-1 in the final seconds against Pio – who seem to be the Stoke City of the Queens League, launching Rory Delap-esque long throws into the box at every opportunity. Pio find the net with the last kick of the game, securing a 3-2 victory, and the commentator gives it the full 'GOOOOOOOL' at the drama of it all, as Porcinas collapse to the ground in devastation. Players are crying uncontrollably on both teams, for different reasons. To them, this really matters.

As darkness falls, there's a 45-minute break for concerts by Argentine rapper Nicki Nicole and Colombian singer Manuel Turizo, both huge names in the Spanish-speaking world. Then it's on to the Kings League showpiece, started by the tightrope walker, who treads his way from the roof to a position above the centre circle, then drops the ball onto the pitch to begin the match.

It's pretty much chaos from there: eight goals and a penalty awarded by VAR after an almighty row, only for xBuyer's Roger Carbo to do a Simone Zaza impression by stuttering up to the ball and blazing it comically over the bar.

The crowd is lapping up every second as the final advances to the day's third Kings League shootout. As "Barr-i-o! Barr-i-o!" and "Buy-er! Buy-er!" chants compete in the stands, xBuyer win the day, prompting their joint presidents – gaming YouTuber Javier 'xBuyer' Ruiz and his younger brother Eric – to race onto the pitch in joy. Fans excitedly jump up and down and Javier yells 'VAMOS! VAMOS! VAMOS!' into a microphone, before screaming names of random countries. "ESPANA! MEXICO! ARGENTINA!"

It's way past 11pm now and a significant portion of the crowd disappear ahead of the Queens League final, which Pio win 3-1 in rather less dramatic fashion against Las Troncas. The presentation ceremony finishes at nearly 12.30am, eight and a half hours after we began. "This is the best moment of my entire life," Pio player Ona Aldea tells *FFT*.

Her feelings are echoed by Miki Fernandez of Kings League winners xBuyer. "In any of our dreams, it would have been impossible to think of this – winning in front of nearly 60,000," he beams. "I play in a small league. I'm not the greatest player in Catalonia, but I thought, 'Let's try it – why not?' and here I am. There's a brilliant future for this league. I hope it continues for a long time."

The challenge will be finding a way to stop the novelty from wearing off – throughout 2023, new rules and superstars have regularly been introduced to keep the league fresh. It's not difficult to see why expansion is on the agenda. In theory, there's no reason why the format can't thrive elsewhere.

Our two days in Madrid have felt like being thrust into a parallel universe that the non-Spanish-speaking world knows little about. It's football, Jaime, but not as we know it.

And that right there is the beauty of it – sometimes, people just want to have fun.



JOTA THE SLOTTER

After an injury-hit season, the Liverpool man struck seven goals in his last nine games to remind everyone how he earned his nickname. He tells *FFT* about his World Cup heartbreak, the time he caused Jurgen Klopp to pull a hamstring, why Cristiano Ronaldo won't challenge him to a game of *FIFA*... and what comes next

Words Chris Flanagan

Diogo Jota didn't anticipate the carnage he'd unleashed in Liverpool's technical area when he bagged a dramatic winner against Tottenham in April.

In the space of the next 10 seconds, not only had the whole of Anfield descended into the kind of fervour borrowed from the Portuguese forward's dreams, but Jurgen Klopp had landed himself in hot water for celebrating angrily in front of the fourth official – and pulled a hamstring in the process. It was a celebration that the Liverpool boss would rather forget, though he could hardly blame Jota for the injury.

"He did, actually!" Jota tells *FourFourTwo* now, laughing as he reveals his manager's tongue-in-cheek reaction. "I can't tell you what he said, but when he saw me the next day, he pointed one finger at me..."

We can probably guess which finger that was. The 26-year-old's own celebration was surprisingly tranquil, considering he'd just ▶

scored in front of the Kop to give Liverpool a 4-3 victory in stoppage time, a minute after Spurs had drawn level having trailed 3-0. It was an occasion he'd craved for years.

"For me, it was a great moment," explains the man that Klopp recruited from Wolves in September 2020. "I did score winners at Anfield in my first season, but there was no crowd. Everybody was telling me, 'Oh, you've just scored a winner in front of the Kop – it would have been amazing if the fans were here'. I needed to wait a couple more years to actually get that feeling. Having that moment was really special – I'll remember it for a long time.

"I didn't even notice the manager injuring himself at the time. When I arrived in the dressing room, I already had a few friends sending me the video link of him pulling his hamstring after my goal. You cannot write a script like that. I think it didn't bother him, because it was a key moment for the team. It's a good story to tell!"

FFT is meeting Jota for a natter at Adidas headquarters in Stockport. We've been invited to speak to him after he's finished filming on one of their indoor pitches, going head-to-head with Liverpool team-mate Luis Diaz, to much hilarity. The pair clearly get along well – before the Colombian wideman moved to Anfield from Porto in January 2022, Jota was actually his landlord.

"Yes, that's true!" chuckles Jota, surprised that we knew. "He rented the house I'd lived in when I played for Porto. He was paying me rent, then he ended up playing with me, and I often still bring that up during our conversations. He arrived in January and had a contract with me until July, but because he was going to be my team-mate, I let him out of the contract!"

Jota lost some income but gained a friend. The duo have been part of a group of players who like to spend time with each other away from training. "Because of the language, it has mainly been the Brazilian guys such as Bobby Firmino, Fabinho, Alisson and Arthur, and then we have Luis and Darwin Nunez, and Thiago and Adrian, so it's quite a large group," he says (Firmino and Arthur would leave the club soon afterwards). "Our wives and girlfriends all get along. We get together for birthdays and all sorts.

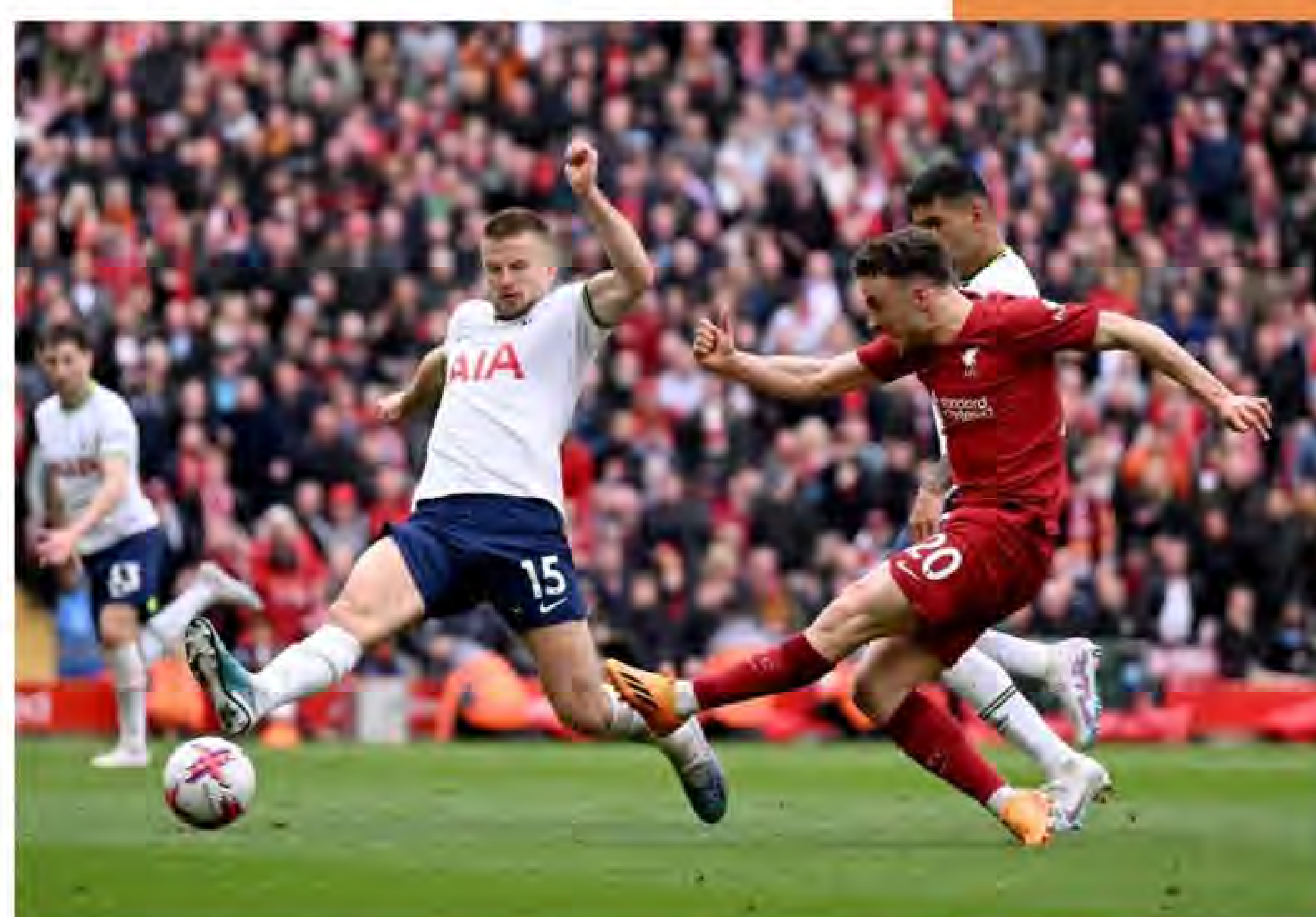
"When Luis arrived in England, he was also really important for us with the energy he brought to the team in the latter stages of that season, when we nearly won everything. Two trophies wasn't bad, but it could have been a story forever."

So much has happened in the 13 months since Jota and Liverpool chased an historic quadruple. This year it was Manchester City battling on four fronts, while the Reds spent most of the campaign languishing some distance below the Premier League's top four, and went out of the Champions League to Real Madrid in the last 16.

In 2021-22, after lifting the League Cup and the FA Cup, they were just two victories from becoming the first English side ever to win all four major trophies in one season, putting even the treble in the shade. Their tally of 92 Premier League points would have won them the title in the two seasons that preceded and followed it – and 20 other Premier League campaigns, in fact. Yet City pipped them by a point, recovering from being 2-0 down with 15 minutes remaining to beat Aston Villa 3-2 on the final day. Less than a week later, Real Madrid defeated Liverpool in the Champions League final at the Stade de France.

The Merseysiders had plenty to be proud of, but Jota looks back on the season wondering







"NOT GOING TO THE WORLD CUP WAS THE HARDEST KNOCK I'VE HAD. I DESERVED TO BE THERE"

what might have been. "It's a mixed feeling," he admits, "because it was the last feeling, and the last games are normally what stick in people's minds. We were so close – we were 15 minutes away from winning the Premier League. And I really think that if we had won the Premier League, we would have won the Champions League.

"I came off in our last game of the season, at home to Wolves, and we were asking how City were doing. They went 2-0 down to Villa and you instantly think, 'We're already in the second half and they're 2-0 down – it'll be hard for them'. Credit to them for turning it around, but that was hard to take.

"Then we needed to focus, because we still had a Champions League final to play. I think we were really unlucky in that game, given the number of opportunities we had. Thibaut Courtois had one of those nights and things didn't go our way. We'd already won two trophies, which were important, but those 15 minutes, those small things – if they change, I think we could have written football history, especially English football."

Within a month of that Champions League final defeat in Paris, Jota picked up a thigh problem that set off an unwanted chain of events, hampering his 2022-23 campaign.

"It was a very hard season for me – I ended the previous one in the national team with an injury in the final game," he recalls, referring to a series of Nations League fixtures with Portugal last summer that took their toll.

"So, I started pre-season injured. I came back but got injured again during pre-season. I came back again and started playing a few games, then suffered a big injury in October, probably because my pre-season wasn't what it normally is. It was the biggest injury of my career."

Stretchered off with a serious calf injury in the final minutes of a home win against Manchester City, he instantly feared what it would mean. "When you feel something like I did, and you go off on a stretcher, it doesn't look too good," he reflects. "You still have hope that it's not serious. Because we were so close to the World Cup, I was just hoping that I could recover in time.

"When I was told that I wouldn't, and that I couldn't go to the World Cup, that was the hardest knock I've had in my career. Just... sadness. I had the opportunity to play my first World Cup and I knew I was playing an important role for the national team – I'd played a big role in qualification, so I felt like I deserved to be there. But I couldn't be."

His colleagues at Liverpool did their best to console him, as did Klopp. "The next day, he gave me a proper hug," says Jota. "He knew that, at that moment, there wasn't much to say – he was just trying to comfort me. And during my rehabilitation, he'd ask how things were going every time he saw me. You notice that he cares. That's all you can ask for: that the person in charge of the team cares about all of the players, and demonstrates that he's counting on you whenever you're back."

Jota did head to Qatar to watch one World Cup match. "Liverpool had a training camp



in Dubai in December, so it wasn't far, and I went to Portugal's last group game against South Korea," he says. "We lost, so I said, 'I'm not coming back!' I probably wasn't a lucky charm. I was there supporting the team, but I also wanted to be playing. Then, seeing the team struggling to score against Morocco in the quarter-final, you know you could make an impact, but you can't."

When Jota returned to action in February, Liverpool sat 10th in the table. A transitional campaign had seen Sadio Mané depart and Darwin Nunez show signs of promise without being prolific, while Luis Diaz suffered his own six-month layoff and January recruit Cody Gakpo was, at that point, still finding his feet.

Things had gone similarly awry during Jota's lengthy injury absence in his first season at Anfield. In 2020-21, he returned with the club sixth in the table, and helped them to finish third. This time, even though

Clockwise from above EA Sports – it's, literally, in the game; "The biggest injury in my career"; his late, late winner sent Klopp into ranting rapture; is that joy, pain, or a bit of both?

he didn't score in his first 11 games after coming back, the Reds lost only two of their final 18 league matches and climbed to fifth.

"I'm certainly more of a lucky charm in that situation!" he says, smiling. "When I'm on the pitch, I feel I can be important. I wasn't scoring at first, but I was getting assists which gave me confidence. If I'm scoring, though, I'm helping more."

Jota's final nine appearances of the season delivered seven goals, including braces in a 6-1 thrashing at Leeds, 3-2 win at home to Nottingham Forest and 4-4 final-day draw at Southampton. According to the man himself, changing his boots played a role. From that Elland Road romp onwards, he wore Adidas' snazzy orange X Speedportal footwear, part of their recently-released Heatspawn Pack.

"I never scored with the previous boots and it's a psychological thing if you're a striker – 'maybe it's the boots I need to change'," he says. "Then you score and everything feels fine. They're just tools, but when you look at them, they give you different feelings."

Not that he allows superstition to have free rein. "I try not to, because it gives you a lot of work to have everything always the same," he says, with emphasis. "Then, if one of those things doesn't happen for whatever reason, you're already 1-0 down. But if the boots feel nice and you're scoring... I remember Karim Benzema wearing the same ones – it's hard to argue when you're scoring."

Jota's goal against Spurs gave him a chance to air his video game celebration: sitting on the turf, pretending to hold a controller. He's long been a huge *FIFA* enthusiast – he has his own eSports team, Diogo Jota eSports, and can give a seriously tough test for those on his team who play it for a living. In 2021, he was briefly ranked world No.1 on *FIFA*'s ▸

Ultimate Team Champions leaderboard, after winning 30 matches in a row.

"I often get involved in competitions with the professional *FIFA* players, which happen once or twice a month, and I do win some games," he tells *FFT* with a grin. "I have an eSports team and sometimes I do better than my own players – not because they're bad, but because I can actually compete with them! That feels really nice – when you can compete with people who only do that for a living."

Understandably, then, there isn't a long list of Reds team-mates queuing up to try to beat him. "I don't think there is, to be honest," he reveals. "I played Trent Alexander-Arnold in the final in the ePremier League Invitational during lockdown; I was representing Wolves back then and he was representing Liverpool, and I beat him. He doesn't play that often nowadays, so I don't think there's a guy who could beat me!"

And with the national team, has he ever taken on Cristiano Ronaldo at *FIFA*? "I don't think Ronaldo is a fan of video games," he chuckles. One suspects that if CR7 thought there was a chance of defeat, he would avoid playing at all. "Yeah, exactly!" laughs Jota. "He's very competitive."

Jota's focus now is on taking Liverpool back to the top after a difficult season. There will be no Champions League football in 2023-24 – the Reds will be in the Europa League for the first time in eight years, but that doesn't mean they won't take it seriously. "I played in the Europa League before with Wolves," continues Jota. "Although the fans are used to playing in the Champions League every single year and it will feel like a downgrade, it's still a prestigious competition. We'll give our best to win it."

It should at least mean they avoid Real Madrid, their Champions League conquerors in each of the past three seasons. "Well, they can somehow finish third in their group and still be in our way..." says Jota. "Since I came to Liverpool, I've always got knocked out by Real Madrid, so hopefully they're not there."

In the Premier League, the Reds will hope that a more settled forward line can help them to challenge again. Jota believes that, despite a difficult 12 months, Liverpool can push for the title in 2023-24. "Yes, I hope so," he declares. "In the last few years, we have always been there – three seasons with over 90 points, which is incredible. Not to win the league with so many points is even more incredible. So, I think our target needs to be that: to do better than the season we've just had, for sure, and be fighting for titles.

"I PLAY AGAINST PROFESSIONAL *FIFA* PLAYERS, AND I DO WIN SOME GAMES..."





"You always need to refresh the squad with new players. That's what we've done, and if we stick together for a long time, things will get better. In the season we've just had, we weren't there – it's the truth – but hopefully that was hitting the bottom and we can bounce back and try to fight for titles again."

For Jota himself, a full season on the pitch is his first aim. When he did that in 2021-22, Liverpool challenged for every honour going, earning him a new long-term deal after he scored 21 goals in all competitions. "I hope that I can score that number or more," he says now. "The season before last was very successful – almost the most successful ever in English football – and for me it was great as well. I was so happy that Liverpool offered me a new deal and I could commit myself to the club for a long period of time.

"I know they trust me and that's important: to know that you're in a stable place, with people who give you the confidence to go out on to the pitch and produce excellent performances. This summer, I want to get through a proper pre-season, then hopefully have a great season."

If he does, he'll give Jurgen Klopp plenty more reasons to celebrate on the Anfield touchline in 2023-24. Just look out for that hamstring, gaffer.

Jota wears the adidas X Speedportal boots as part of the Heatspawn Pack, available to buy now at adidas.co.uk/heatspawn_pack



Featuring Robbie Williams' Single
It's Only Us

ENGLAND

EA SPORTS

FIFA 2000



"FINALLY, A GAME WHERE THE REFEREE DOESN'T RULE OUT MY GOALS"

EA Sports releases a new game under a new name this month, following the end of a 30-year partnership with FIFA. From Sol Campbell to Avril Lavigne and a Polish MMA fighter, it's an era that'll live long in the memory

Words Chris Evans

Thirty years on, Tom Stone remembers the conversations at EA Sports ahead of them launching the very first edition of *FIFA*. It's hard to believe today that there was ever any doubt the world's most renowned video game organisation would make a success out of football. Back in 1993, though, before the birth of the Xbox or PlayStation, there was plenty of cynicism among EA's top brass.

"The Americans just didn't get it," reveals Stone, who was appointed as the company's vice-president of European marketing that year. "They were like, 'Soccer? What is that?' They asked how many units this game was going to sell; they said football wasn't very popular. We countered, 'Actually, it really is'."

In the end, even EA's European division, who had argued the case for the creation of a football game, couldn't have foreseen how colossal their idea would become.

As much as Stone and his colleagues were consciously seeking an "evergreen franchise" that would deliver big returns each year, just as *Madden NFL* was doing in North America, what followed was nothing short of a global sensation. After the game's maiden iteration, *FIFA International Soccer*, released on Sega Mega Drive in December 1993, the series sold in excess of 330 million copies and became the best-selling sports video game franchise of all time.

And it nearly didn't see the light of day.

SEND FOR TONY GUBBA

"It was kind of a little play with soccer in the US, as the World Cup was being held over there in 1994," explains Lee Price, the author of *FIFA Football: The Story Behind The Video Game Sensation*, when *FFT* asks about that first Mega Drive release 30 years ago. "But there was little resource and frankly limited interest, and the game was very close to not being finished on time.

"They thought, 'Let's get it out and forget about it', and sleepwalked into a cultural phenomenon. It became so big, they had to make another one, then another one. In time, it overtook *Madden* and proved the title that, worldwide, everyone wanted to play. It wasn't an accidental success, but it wasn't a million miles off that."

The idea of a football game had first been suggested to EA in late 1991, after senior executive Mark Lewis identified a gap in the market. At the time, early '90s cult classic *Sensible Soccer* was yet to hit the shops, and while *Match Day*, *Kick Off* and *Emlyn Hughes International Soccer* had earned some fans, no football game thus far been a huge hit.

Despite the case Lewis put forward, EA's US division were sceptical and felt football was too tricky to replicate. They weren't entirely wrong: the technology of the period made for one-dimensional gameplay that struggled to provide authenticity. Most football games were fairly formulaic and rigid, lacking the fluidity of the real thing.

But the team of developers and business brains working on the game's concept had hatched a plan to stand out from the crowd. Gameplay would be improved by breaking the tradition of the era, shunning a bird's eye view and creating an angled shot from the corner of the stadium to show more of the pitch and make players seem 3D.

"*Madden* had a similar 45-degree view and that was one of the two things that allowed *FIFA* to break through," Stone tells *FFT*. "The other was the licensing strategy we pursued: signing up FIFA as a partner."

The 1993 debut bore *FIFA's* name but didn't include real-life players, clubs nor domestic leagues. It was a purely international affair, fake-named identikit players padding out the squads of 48 national teams worldwide, including the powerhouses of Luxembourg, Iraq and Hong Kong.











Tony Gubba recorded commentary for the PC CD-ROM version, although it was on the Mega Drive that the game really took off – EA's target of selling 300,000 copies across Europe, which was considered ambitious, was smashed within weeks in the UK alone. More than half a million units were flogged in the first four weeks of release in Britain, with *FIFA International Soccer* remaining at the top of gaming charts deep into 1994.

Work to make the second version of the game even better was well underway. One of Stone's jobs was to secure licensing deals from all over the world, to allow *FIFA 95* to feature the major clubs. A year later, *FIFA 96* included the real player names, too.

"EA Sports' slogan was, 'If it's in the game, it's in the game'," says Stone. "That led to me getting a plane with two other people, flying around the globe to sign up every league we could. We had a relationship with FIFA, but the last two letters of their name were an indication of what rights they actually had: f**k all. They had nothing, so we helped to organise and make leagues realise they had rights – rights to stadiums, players, player likenesses, apparel and league structure.

"I flew to Italy, Spain, France and Denmark. We did MLS in North America as well as the J.League in Japan. What made *FIFA* garner admirers was that it ended up being a very compelling game experience."

Quickly, the marketplace was also filling up with a host of other football titles, but the credibility provided by naming rights meant that EA Sports' offering stole the attention – even if other rivals had edged ahead of *FIFA* in the gameplay stakes.



"*FIFA* BECAME SUCH A BEHEMOTH THAT IT WAS AN HONOUR TO BE ON THE COVER"

Left *FIFA* down the years, now with 65 per cent less eye strain **Above** "You've got my face all wrong on here"

"EA SPORTS DISCOVERED AVRIL LAVIGNE"

Despite that early success, the relationship between EA Sports and football's governing body wasn't always smooth. The value of





FIFA's endorsement certainly hadn't gone unnoticed; no partnership was sacred if there was potential for a better deal elsewhere.

"It was awkward because the only thing they wanted to talk about was, 'How much money are you going to give us?'," reflects Stone. "There was little discussion about building a long-term partnership, which is what I was keen to establish from a commercial point of view.

"We didn't know how successful the game was going to become, but we had a sense that this thing could be pretty cool. Our position was that we wanted to be a good long-term partner with FIFA, but they never responded.

"I once said it was like dating a girl you feel is wonderful, but you think, 'She isn't saying very much and I'm not sure where I stand'. I did find out, though, because in 1996 I got a call from someone at Sony who said, 'You and I need to speak'. I met him and he explained, 'FIFA are out shopping the licence'. He told me FIFA had approached Sony and asked them if they'd be interested in taking the rights exclusively."



Potential disaster was averted, before EA Sports cemented their relationship with the release of *FIFA: Road to World Cup 98*, an enduring cult classic that featured David Beckham on the cover in the UK. Whereas the French version starred David Ginola, who didn't even make it to the World Cup, a fine tournament surely lay ahead for Becks; what could possibly go wrong? With Paolo Maldini and Raul picked to headline in Italy and Spain respectively, it was one of the first examples of EA's new strategy to produce a series of localised covers targeted at different regions.

Prior to that, the first cover shots captured in-match action, spawning several unlikely protagonists. For *FIFA 93*, Polish journeyman Piotr Swierczewski made an appearance on the cover alongside England star David Platt, using a picture taken from a 1994 World Cup qualifier at Wembley. A year later it was Spurs' Norwegian shot-stopper, Erik Thorstvedt, leaping to make a save. Then, most bizarrely of all, Notts County's long-throw master Andy Legg featured on the cover of *FIFA 96*, attempting to perform a slide tackle on Brescia midfielder Ioan Sabau in the Anglo-Italian Cup final. The Welshman was apparently more appealing than one of Sabau's team-mates in that tie, USA 94 icon Gheorghe Hagi...

The agreements put in place were much simpler than those necessary to get today's megastars signed up, though the reputation *FIFA* gathered in those early years helped to grease the gears of those discussions.

"From the late 2000s, there was more of a negotiation with players, but by then *FIFA* was such a behemoth that it was an honour to be on the cover," says author Price. "You see players debating their stats on the game and checking their likeness, but even if being on the cover wasn't quite the Ballon d'Or, it was one of the ultimate achievements as a footballer to say that you'd made it. What a power that is for a video game."

It wasn't just about on-pitch stars, either. Over the years, getting on the *FIFA* playlist became a significant fillip for musicians of all statuses, and was credited with elevating the careers of several artists. Songs became synonymous with individual editions of the game, and the mere mention of particular tracks was enough to automatically transport some fanatics to a specific year mostly spent pummelling controllers.

"If you think back to *FIFA 98* and listening to Blur's *Song 2* on repeat, I loved that song because of *FIFA*, and there are many people who say the same about a different song," reminisces Price. "One of my favourite stories was that EA Sports basically discovered Avril Lavigne. One of her very first gigs was in EA's canteen, attempting to impress the music guy they'd hired, because they realised that having a soundtrack elevated the authenticity and feeling of the game. They agreed a deal to put Lavigne's debut single, *Complicated*, into *FIFA 2003*." ▸

FROM *FIFA*'S FIRST COVER TO MMA FIGHTER





Piotr Swierczewski found himself on the cover of the very first *FIFA*, alongside David Platt – but his unusual career didn't end there.

The Polish midfielder was a Saint-Etienne player by the time *FIFA International Soccer* was released in December 1993, later signing for Gamba Osaka in Japan, then appearing for his country at the 2002 World Cup. Suitably impressed, Birmingham City snapped him up, although it didn't go well. Total number of games: one, as a substitute in a Premier League defeat at home to Chelsea.

Swierczewski finished off his playing career back home in Poland, where he was found guilty of assaulting a police officer and eventually became an MMA fighter, winning his second showdown over the summer at the age of 51. His next opponent? Surely it can only be one man. Platt vs Swierczewski: the rematch. Somebody make it happen...







Bagging *Song 2* was a bit more unconventional. "Sean Ratcliffe, who became head of EA Sports Europe, phoned Blur just as they were about to go on stage in Australia," recounts Stone of the *FIFA 98* agreement. "Sean said to them, 'We want *Song 2* – what can we give you?' and I think it was Damon Albarn who replied, 'We've got more money than we know what to do with, but what we can't get is tickets to the World Cup final'. We knew how to get them, so we secured four tickets for the 1998 World Cup Final and the deal was done.

"We also had this relationship with Robbie Wiliams for *FIFA 2000*, which all came about when he was interviewed on his exit from the Brit Awards after winning everything. He was asked, 'What are you going to do now?' and he said, 'I'm going to go home and play *FIFA 99*'. So, literally the next morning, I called his management and queried, 'Is that true?'. They confirmed that it was, so I suggested we meet up and discuss a relationship." Williams did more than lend them an old hit: he wrote *FIFA 2000*'s theme song and then released it as a single as the game hit the shelves, with *It's Only Us* reaching No.1 as a double A-side with *She's The One.* In exchange, his beloved Port Vale were included in the game.

RONALDO AT SUGARLOAF MOUNTAIN

FIFA had the star quality, but it didn't guarantee the game's position as the number one football sim. A contender to that crown came in the form of *Pro Evolution Soccer*, produced by Japanese development company Konami. *PES* – or *Pro Evo*, as many preferred to call it – couldn't come



"FIFA ARE NOW BACK IN 1993, WHERE THEY HAVE NO RIGHTS TO ANYTHING EXCEPT THE WORLD CUP"

close to rivalling *FIFA* for its licensing, yet it's affectionately remembered for team names like Merseyside Red for Liverpool, and players such as Roberto Larcos instead of Roberto Carlos. And, vitally, its gameplay was deemed to have the edge on *FIFA*.

"PES felt like football, while *FIFA* felt a bit kick-and-run back then," says Steve Merrett, who ran PR for *PES* in the UK between 2002 and 2019. "*FIFA* was very lightweight at the time and *PES* had physicality to it – it was a slower game, but that made it feel more precise and tactical. There were also little things, like the way players received the ball. In the early games, when you had Beckham and Paul Gascoigne in it, there was a slight difference to the way they played, whereas *FIFA* players were identikit."

Konami weren't the only ones to notice. "I shouldn't be telling you this, but during lunchtimes when we were on a break, we wouldn't play *FIFA* – we'd play *PES* instead," confesses Stone. "You have to acknowledge it, otherwise you're not dealing with reality, and the reality was that *PES* was a brilliant game. We had to pull our socks up and say, 'What can we learn from this?'"

In its heyday, *PES* was consistently selling between seven and nine-and-a-half million copies for each edition and it developed an enormous following, particularly in the UK.

However, while *PES* did add a smattering of officially licensed clubs, stadiums and competitions along the way, the pressure to offer gameplay that *FIFA* couldn't was too much to maintain.



"*PES*' glory days were overseen by a guy called Seabass Takatsuka and he was the man who took it from PlayStation to PlayStation 2, but he left around the time it went to PlayStation 3," continues Merrett. "PlayStation 3 was an awful time for *PES.* They brought in this brand new development team that said they were going for more realism, but they were actually going for realism of faces.

"Around the time of *PES 2007*, it became this tedious game where all of the midfield nuance and individuality was taken out in place of pace. That drop in quality coincided with *FIFA* doing what Konami had previously been doing, so it was almost as though they swapped ethos."

Opposition finally vanquished, EA Sports continued to develop *FIFA*. They always liked to dabble with new features, like the foul or chase-the-ref buttons and an indoor football mode in the '90s. Advances in technology accelerated innovation. They toyed with a spin-off,







FIFA Street, in 2005 before rebooting it to greater success in 2012; brought in *FIFA*'s Player Career mode, where you could play as one individual; and added another dimension with The Journey, an immersive story mode focused on a fictional youngster named Alex Hunter and packed full of cameos.

EA's piece de resistance then landed with the creation of FIFA Ultimate Team, in which gamers collected packs of players to build a world-beating team from scratch. Ultimate Team revolutionised the gaming experience, becoming a cash cow for *FIFA* with in-game purchases and introduction of a new fantasy football aspect.

The advent of superfast broadband all over the world also mushroomed the online play modes, as Ultimate Team became the perfect environment for players to test their prowess against others around the globe. It proved the mode of choice for the booming market of professional *FIFA* events, with football clubs recruiting gamers to represent them in lucrative competitions.

Clockwise from bottom left It's Only You, Me & *FIFA*; eSports gave teens an excuse at last; serious business; *I Can't Believe It's Not FIFA 24*; it's a real name, Bytheway; from the couch to the Copacabana; Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts FC

Prize money started to run into six figures for the biggest tournaments, streamed by millions of eSports fans and even broadcast on television by Sky. It quickly turned into big business, and while there were tales of casual *FIFA* players upsetting the order by beating pros at top events, elite online competition became principally the realm of well-backed teams boasting full-time players.

It was different when David Bytheway was plucked from his bedroom in Wolverhampton to play *FIFA* on the grandest stage. It wasn't just EA who saw the opportunity; even FIFA's grey-haired bigwigs rolled out the red carpet.

"I went to the 2014 Interactive World Cup that was hosted in Brazil," reflects Bytheway, who later joined Wolfsburg as the first British *FIFA* player to sign for a professional club. "It was the top-tier event and the one that everyone wanted to make – the experience was amazing. Me and a friend flew out to Rio and landed at 6am, but we couldn't go to bed because the FIFA reps said there was filming to do on Copacabana beach. That night, we were taken to a rooftop bar above the beach when all of a sudden, the crew of *Match of the Day* came in. We turn around and Gary Lineker, Alan Shearer and the lot of them are walking towards us.

"The final was staged on top of Sugarloaf Mountain and the Brazilian Ronaldo turned up; he came to shake my hand before the final and wish me good luck. It was insane."

THE KING IS DEAD, LONG LIVE THE KING

Now, after three decades, the relationship between FIFA and EA Sports is over. Instead, EA are releasing a game under the name of *EA Sports FC 24* this autumn, after the two parties announced a split following *FIFA 23*, unable to agree a new deal to extend their union due to a breakdown in negotiations. The new brand retains all of the gameplay and licences of EA's previous football games, but without the recognisable *FIFA* name. The governing body intends to launch a game of its own next year to rival EA.

Stone tells *FFT*, "I'm so proud of my former colleagues from EA who said to FIFA, 'Our game is bigger than you, and while we would love to work with you, the rights exist in the local leagues'. FIFA are now back in 1993, where they have no rights to anything apart from the World Cup."

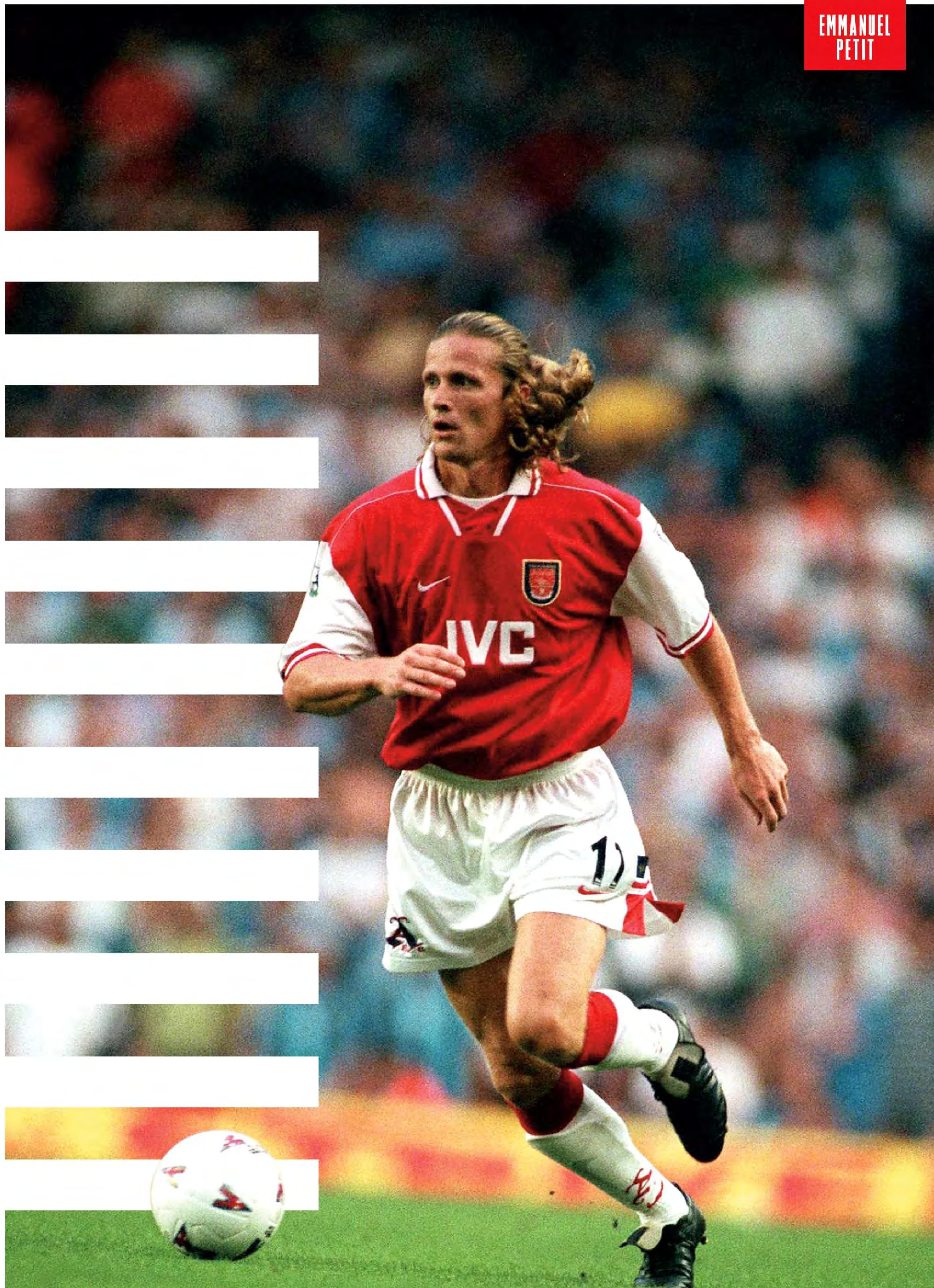
While EA Sports' game will broadly stay the same, the divorce brought the curtain down on one of football's most famous alliances, ending an era that played such a big part in so many people's lives. It's an era that may not have happened at all, had EA's sceptical suits not been persuaded some 30 years ago. "Soccer? What is that?"



"IF GOD TOOK MY BROTHER, IT WAS BECAUSE HE WANTED ME TO DO SOMETHING IN FOOTBALL"

The Marseille match-fixing scandal turned Emmanuel Petit into a zombie, but the midfielder hit back to become a champion with Arsenal and France, driven by a desire to honour the sibling he lost as a teenager

Words Arthur Renard



"When I won the World Cup, there was a feeling of serenity. I had fulfilled the promise I made to myself. I'd reached the target."

For any footballer, lifting the World Cup is the pinnacle – a life-changing moment. For Emmanuel Petit, there was a deeper, more personal meaning when Les Bleus beat Brazil at the Stade de France in 1998.

"I was interviewed by French TV straight after the match," Petit tells *FourFourTwo*. "I remember saying how proud I was to win the World Cup in front of our own fans. Then I said, 'I just want to say to my family: this is it! I did it. I did it!' I got very emotional – I was almost ready to cry on camera. The people in France knew about my story. On TV, it had a big impact."

Petit's story is a heartbreaking one. In 1988, the midfielder was with his parents in Monaco, having recently signed for Les Monegasques as a teenager, when they received a devastating call from Dieppe, back home in Normandy. His elder brother, Olivier, had been playing for amateur side Arques that afternoon. "A friend phoned and told my father that my brother had died on the pitch," Petit, 52, recounts now. "I remember my father smashing his face into the wall. He was so distressed. It was the first time I'd seen him cry."

It appeared that Olivier had died because of a brain haemorrhage. "Since that day, ▸

I made a promise to myself," continues Petit. "I would always play for my brother, I would always play for my family. I would find extra motivation every single time I touched the ball and try everything to take the pain away, for my family. I wanted them to be happy. Because he died on a football pitch, I thought it was like a divine task. I'm not religious, but I thought that if my brother died on the pitch, it was for a reason. If God took my brother, it was probably because he wanted me to do something in football.

"Whenever I entered the pitch after that, I always said the same prayer in my mind. Before kick-off, I would go up to the penalty area, pick out some grass, let it float away in the wind and think the same thing: 'I know you're watching me. I will try my best for you to be proud of me. I will give my best on the pitch today'."

The words are etched into Petit's memory. Today, there is emotion in his voice when he utters them.

After his brother's death, Petit made huge strides in his own development as a player. At 18, he became a regular in Monaco's first team under Arsene Wenger, and he earned a call-up for France by coach Michel Platini before he turned 20. With Wenger, he helped his club to win the Coupe de France and reach the Cup Winners' Cup final, though the league title proved a step too far.

Marseille were almost unbeatable, but l'OM were later stripped of the 1992-93 title after a bribery scandal. Even at the time, Petit had concerns. "We heard so many rumours about corruption at Marseille," he explains. "Every single season, we were fighting with Marseille and Paris Saint-Germain for the title, and so many times we finished second behind l'OM. It's such a shame that we didn't get the title. Marseille were very popular with the press and the fans, so you're not on the same level – it was difficult for us to fight. It was a long time ago now, but it leaves a bad taste in the mouth because I think the court didn't go far enough with the sanctions.

"It was killing the dream I had as a young boy. I wasn't training the same way I used to – I was pissed off about what was going on; about the court's decision. I lost motivation and my passion for football. For something like three seasons, I was anonymous on the pitch – I was disgusted with everything, with the whole system."

"WHAT THE F**K ARE YOU DOING, MANU?"

When Wenger departed Monaco and a flurry of other managerial changes followed, Petit also grew disillusioned at being constantly required to switch position. He believed that people weren't always being transparent with him. "It wasn't the vision I had when I started to play football as a child," he continues. "I'd had enough of people in football; of big heads who were always pretending to be doing so many important things. I was just tired of it all, plus I was separating from my girlfriend. At the time, I was focusing on my private life more than being a professional footballer, to be perfectly honest."







Top to bottom A fresh-faced Petit impressed Wenger enough at Monaco for his boss to later smuggle him to Arsenal, where he also excelled

That private life was becoming increasingly hard, as Petit began to suffer from depression. "I had no desire," adds the Frenchman. "I was like a zombie: living every day the same way with no passion, no motivation, no target and no future either."

But through chaos came clarity. In the first half of 1996, Petit recovered his spark. "One day I woke up, took a shower, then tried to wipe the moisture off the bathroom mirror to look at myself," he says. "When I looked into my own eyes, it was quite a shock. I looked at myself with honesty and didn't hide any more. I thought, 'What the f**k are you doing, Manu? What do you want in life? What are you waiting for? You're like a ghost. Wake up! Wake up!' It was like someone had punched me in the face. That day, everything changed. I don't know why it happened that day. But it happened that day."

Perhaps Petit's moment of awakening was a result of the spiritual path he had taken. "I read so many books, travelled around the world and met spiritual people, especially Buddhists," he says. "It helped me so much. Step by step, my mind became more and more structured, I got my motivation and passion back, and I regained confidence in myself. I became much stronger mentally and emotionally. I was like a caterpillar who had become a butterfly.

"I came back to the training ground feeling like a lion. I remember my team-mates said, 'Wow, what happened to you? You changed so much – you're not the same Manu. You're back!' I said, 'Yeah, you bet I'm back, and now you're going to see...' I did well with Monaco and hoped that I could go to Euro 96. I felt I'd get an opportunity but it never happened, which I understood in the end."

The tournament had come a tad too early in his recovery, but narrowly missing out only added to his motivation. "I thought, 'OK, this is just the beginning, Manu – now you have to convince everybody, the French boss as well, that you're back. Next season, you're going to start the same way that you finished this season'. That's what I did. I worked really hard in pre-season. I was so angry, so pissed off – I was ready to fight everybody."

In 1996-97, he fulfilled his childhood dream, inspiring his side to the French title. Straight after clinching the Ligue 1 trophy, he declared his next ambition during a joint interview with Monaco's president, Jean-Louis Campora, on live television.

"During the celebrations, I was sat next to Campora when the presenter asked him about my future," recalls Petit. "Campora said, 'He still has a contract; next season, he will stay here'. Then they passed the microphone to me and I said, 'I have big respect for you, Mr Campora, but I disagree: it's time for me to leave. I'm almost 27 and it's time to have a different challenge. I have done everything I can with Monaco'. My first target was to play in England. When I was a kid, I used to read cartoons about English football – I was dreaming about that."

North London rivals Arsenal and Tottenham were both interested. Petit visited the pair of them on the same day. He went to White Hart Lane first, and when Spurs made him an offer, he asked for a couple of days to think about it. Agreeing to his request, the club ordered him a taxi, not realising where that taxi would take him. "When I got in the cab, the driver asked me where I wanted to go," Petit tells *FFT*. "I was with some people, and we were going to Arsene Wenger's house. [Vice-chairman] David Dein was there, too. They arranged for us to meet there, as they wanted everything to be secret.





"Arsenal's offer was far better than Spurs' and I really wanted to play for Arsene again, because he was my first coach at Monaco and the one who gave me an opportunity in the first team. He put his trust in me. Arsene spoke to me on a different level, as a human being. I loved the way he managed training sessions and the way he managed his team during matches. There was no doubt in my mind that I would go to Arsene, and Mr Dein was also very kind.

Above A World Cup final against Brazil on home soil was just the moment he had waited for – he delivered a goal and a trophy for his late brother

"I could feel their desire and I was excited by the project they put on the table, with the guys I was set to play alongside. After three hours I said, 'Yeah, I'm ready to sign for you'."

RIVALDO'S CANCELLED HOLIDAY

It turned out to be an excellent decision. In his very first season at the club, Petit formed a stellar midfield double act with compatriot Patrick Vieira as Arsenal sealed the Double, beginning an era of success for the Gunners under Wenger. His performances earned him a recall to the France squad. By the time the 1998 World Cup rolled around, on home soil, he had established himself as a starter for Les Bleus alongside Didier Deschamps. Vieira was used more commonly as a substitute, and emerged from the bench in the final to tee up his Arsenal team-mate for the goal that rounded off a 3-0 triumph over Brazil.

"When I scored, my first thought was for my family, who were in the stadium, and for my brother, who could see me from the sky," says Petit. "I saw my family after the game and my father started crying again. I hadn't seen him cry since that phone call in 1988."

Petit will never forget the emotions of that night at the Stade de France – not just for his family, but for the whole country. "Winning ▶

the World Cup, especially at home, is the best thing that can happen to a footballer, as you don't touch just the fans' hearts – you touch every single person in your country," says Petit. "Somehow, you become immortal. You become part of the history of your nation. We're not talking about football any more; it's more than that. Even now, people stop me every time I walk on the street in France. Before this interview, I went out running with my dog and so many people stopped me and asked for a picture. Every time, they say the same thing: 'Thank you for what you've done for your country'.

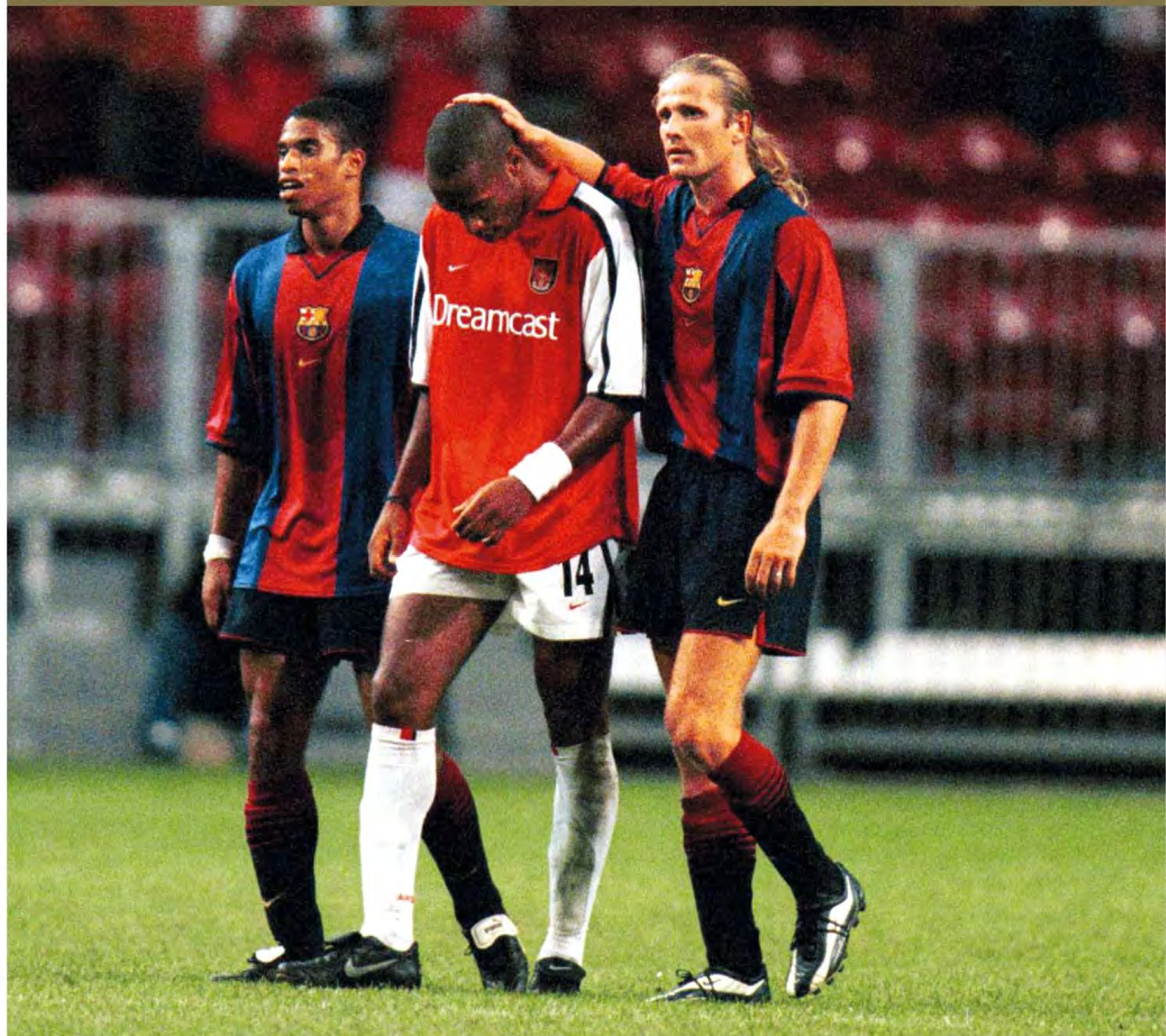
"I'm extremely proud about what we did as a squad; it's something that links us forever, until our death. Winning the World Cup will change your life forever – you won't be the same player or person any more."

But holidays in Brazil were off the agenda. "I played with Rivaldo at Barcelona after that – we had a really good connection and he invited me to Brazil for Christmas," says Petit. "Then he came back to me saying, 'I think it's not a good idea for you to come, because of the World Cup – it's too early in people's minds over there'. I said, 'But it's just football?' He said, 'Yeah, but football in Brazil isn't just football – it's a religion'."

By then, Petit had also won Euro 2000 with France. That summer, he moved to the Camp Nou. Despite his success across 118 Arsenal appearances, he'd spend only three seasons at Highbury. It's something he regrets.

"I was very happy at Arsenal, with the fans and my team-mates," he reflects. "I played well and we won the Double. But I could feel that Arsene was thinking of selling me. Maybe he wanted to sign other players, and he got it right in the end because they were invincible in the Premier League.

"But the main reason I decided to leave was my wife. Sure, there were sporting reasons – I wanted to win the Champions League – but my wife was tired of the rain and wanted to live in the sun, so I listened to her. If I have any advice for players now, it's: 'Don't let your wife decide where you go'."



Clockwise from above Petit took on Thierry & Co weeks after departing; the old ball and chain, apparently; Chelsea: nice while it lasted; a world champion with ~~Arsenal~~ France

TURNING DOWN FERGIE

What followed was a year of frustration and irritations with coaching staff, team-mates and others at Barça. "I signed for four years, but things turned out very badly just a couple of days after I arrived," laments Petit. "I was quite surprised by other people's behaviour. Lorenzo Serra Ferrer was our manager, but I really didn't like his style and management. I had troubles with some of the players as well, because of rivalries in the team about power and leadership. Can you imagine how difficult it was to win together on the pitch when there was no link between us? We had the talent to win – if you look at the players,

NEVER GO BACK?

Petit opted not to return to Arsenal but these players did have a second spell, with mixed results



MARTIN KEOWN

The youth-team product made 27 appearances before being flogged to Aston Villa, unable to secure the extra £50 per week he wanted on his Gunners contract. "It was a matter of principle," he said. Brought back from Everton in 1993, he won three top-flight titles over the next 11 years.



SOL CAMPBELL

An 'Invincible' in his first spell, the centre-half came up from League Two for a second go with Arsenal in 2010, after just one game for Sven-Goran Eriksson's Notts County. He contributed 14 outings and even a goal in the Champions League – better than losing away at Morecambe, all told.



JENS LEHMANN

The German goalkeeper, also a member of the 2003-04 'Invincibles', decided to retire after a shift at Stuttgart and, aged 41, was due to take his coaching badges with Arsenal when an injury crisis saw him called into action. He started in a 3-1 win at Blackpool: his 200th and final Arsenal game.



THIERRY HENRY

The Frenchman's initial stint at Arsenal went OK, bringing 226 goals in 370 matches, so returning on loan from New York Red Bulls aged 34 could have proved risky. Instead it enhanced his legacy further, as he bagged a late winner in an FA Cup tie against Leeds in his first appearance back.



MATHIEU FLAMINI

The midfielder had four years with Arsenal before heading to Milan. A free agent in 2013, he returned to the Emirates to train, then ended up signing, staying for three more years and scoring a brace against Spurs. Still only 39, he's now the CEO of a biochemicals company, because why not?





we had a beautiful side. But if everyone wants to be the leader, that isn't the right mindset to be a team or win titles."

Petit also found himself being played out of position again. "In more than 30 games I was deployed as a central defender or a left-back, but not really in midfield," he sighs. "I think I played maybe five or six times in midfield."

Things improved when Carles Rexach took over from Serra Ferrer towards the end of the season, but Petit had set his sights on the exit door: "Carles was a very gentle guy and said, 'I know what you've been through during the last few months, but things will change now – you're important to me'. I said, 'I appreciate that, but I think it's too late. In my mind, it's over – I'm gone'.

"I had many clubs interested in taking me back to England. Arsenal approached me but so did Manchester United. I spoke to Arsene. He really wanted me back, but I was honest with him: I said, 'I appreciate it and it's very tempting, but I didn't feel that you wanted me to stay when I signed for Barcelona a year ago'. It's like divorcing somebody: when you don't feel desired by them, what's the point of going back?

"I should have gone to Manchester United, because Sir Alex Ferguson called me twice. We had a very good conversation and it was tempting, but once again I listened to my wife. She wanted to go back to London – she didn't want to live in Manchester – so I made the same mistake twice in one year."

In the capital, Chelsea were also keen on Petit's services. "Claudio Ranieri travelled to Barcelona and I invited him to my home for lunch," remembers the Frenchman. "He was very nice, and I could feel his desire."

Petit duly signed for Chelsea in 2001 but he struggled to get going at Stamford Bridge, partly because of injury. "I never had bad injuries during my career and the first year at Chelsea was good, but I started to have physical troubles in the second season," he admits. "I still had so much love from the Arsenal fans, too, that I think it was hard to convince the Chelsea supporters that I was dedicated to them."


In his third campaign with the Blues – the first after Roman Abramovich's takeover – Petit made only seven appearances. He was released in 2004, aged 33, and never played professional football again.

"I had big injuries, and when Abramovich arrived, with so many players being linked to Chelsea, I knew my time was over," he says now. "I don't regret joining Chelsea, though. My only regret is when I left Arsenal. I have a big regret about the way that went – it's still in my mind. But I got over it."

Petit has sometimes returned to his old club to do TV work at Arsenal games. "Even now, the love and support I receive from the Gunners fans is wonderful," he tells *FFT*. "They always speak about the Double and the way I used to play with Vieira in midfield. If you go to the press room in the Emirates Stadium, there's a framed copy of the front page of the *Daily Mirror* after the 1998 World Cup Final, with me and Patrick on our knees together looking so happy, and the headline: 'Arsenal win the World Cup'. Every time I go to that press room, I get emotional when I see that."

For Emmanuel Petit, that night in Paris will always be the moment his dream came true. The moment he achieved a mission he had set himself 10 years earlier. The moment he honoured his brother on the biggest stage. Olivier, that was for you.

"WINNING THE WORLD CUP MAKES YOU IMMORTAL. IT'S MORE THAN FOOTBALL; IT'S YOUR NATION'S HISTORY"



"DES LYNAM SAID, 'DRURY, YOU'RE LUCKY. YOU CAN WALK INTO SAINSBURY'S AND NOBODY KNOWS WHO THE HELL YOU ARE'"

After 30 years of turning football into poetry, Peter Drury has stepped into Martin Tyler's sizeable shoes this term – from Tshabalala to Manolas, Sky's new commentator relives some of his most famous moments, and tells *FFT* why he's happier out of the spotlight

Interview Chris Flanagan



If Peter Drury was in any doubt about the size of the job he was taking on this season, he needed only to look at the massive display on the wall in the foyer of his new home, Sky Studios in west London. "The greatest show on Earth," it exclaims, alongside a photograph of Manchester City striker Erling Haaland, celebrating the fact that Sky is still the home of the Premier League, as it has been since the league's launch in 1992.

Until this season, the biggest games were accompanied by the dulcet tones of Martin Tyler – this summer, it was Drury who was summoned to take over the microphone and describe the action. "It's a great honour," the commentator tells *FFT*, as we meet him on what's actually his first day exploring the studios – the majority of his working days are spent on stadium gantries up and down the country, or studiously researching his next match from home.

The son of a Kent vicar who was educated in Surrey and is now based in Hertfordshire, the 55-year-old has formed a cult following over the years courtesy of his work with BBC Radio, ITV, BT Sport, Amazon Prime, Premier League Productions and even further afield for SuperSport of South Africa, plus American channels CBS and NBC – he still commentates on Saturday Premier League matches for the latter, alongside his latest role as Sky's new voice of *Super Sunday*.

Drury's three decades in the business have already produced many a famous moment, predominantly thanks to his acclaimed poetic style. "Roma have risen from their ruins!" he yelled when Kostas Manolas' glancing header completed the Italian team's recovery from 4-1 down to eliminate Barcelona in the 2018 Champions League quarter-finals. "Manolas, the Greek God in Rome! This was not meant to happen, this could not happen, this is happening! It's a Greek from Mount Olympus, who has come to the seven hills of Rome and pulled off a miracle!"

Despite the frequent grandeur of his words though, it's clear from meeting Drury that he is an entirely unassuming man, even a little uncomfortable about being thrust into the spotlight. "I'm looking forward to a few weeks down the line when I've stopped being the news," he smiles, despite the reaction to his appointment being overwhelmingly positive, among fans and media alike.

He has long since become a familiar voice for football lovers in the UK and elsewhere – as he explains, he still vividly recalls the days when he too was sat at home, inspired by those who depict the activity on the pitch...

What first ignited your passion for football when you were young?
My passions for football and broadcasting coincided, because I grew up in a family that didn't attend football matches. I loved sport, my brothers and my dad all loved sport, but we didn't go and watch it live, so everything I learned to love about football was through the television and actually the radio, as there wasn't much live football on TV. On Saturday afternoons I used to lock my bedroom door, literally, and have the radio on from 1pm to 6pm, following the football. Then like loads of other kids, I yearned for the day when my parents said I was old enough to stay up and watch *Match of the Day* at 10.30pm. That all gave me a love for the game and people who broadcasted it. They were my conduit to it.

Was there a particular commentator who inspired you when you were starting out?
There were great BBC radio commentators such as Peter Jones and Bryon Butler, iconic names from the 1970s and '80s – they were wonderful users of the language, they had gorgeous voices and you felt you were there. They articulated the game in a special way.

When did you know that you wanted to be a commentator yourself?
Like a million kids, I played football in the park and shouted my own name if I scored! I was always fascinated about commentary, but never even had a pipe dream that I'd do it one day. I went to university, then I was an accountant for a month afterwards, but I had something eating away at me and fancied moving into sports journalism. I got a very lucky break working at the Hayters sports journalism agency on Fleet Street for a year or two. It was largely writing, then in 1990 I applied for a job at BBC local radio in Leeds, and they offered it to me. I was fortunate to be working there when Leeds United were champions of England, then the network in London were keen on the stuff I was doing. There was an explosion in broadcasting around then – Sky came into being and BBC Radio 5 Live began, so opportunities suddenly occurred and I was lucky to be a part of that.

Which was the first significant moment of your broadcasting career?
Leeds in the first season of the Champions League – they had a well-known tie against Stuttgart that went to an additional play-off in Barcelona and I worked on that, then I did Leeds against Rangers at Ibrox. That was an extraordinary game and I couldn't believe it. I was a wet-behind-the-ears, very green and overexcitable commentator – I'd hate to hear my work back, it'd sound horrendous! I was just a young guy living the moment – it was like, 'Pinch me, is it genuinely me doing this?'.

You joined ITV in 1998 and soon did your first World Cup with them that summer.
The tournaments have been great – I've done the last seven World Cups. The audience size multiplies, you know that you're broadcasting under pressure, you're being scrutinised and you've got to deal with that. That's not always easy and you can make mistakes. It's a thrill but a pressure, although we have to remind ourselves it's a pressure we're lucky to have – you get the best seats, for the best matches.

What's your standout moment at a major tournament? We can certainly suggest one that people remember you for...
I'm always very careful with this – I'm keen to make a distinction between the standout moment I've witnessed, and my own work, which would be the height of arrogance for me to talk about! [*Laughs*] My best line is for others to judge and I'm a great believer that the commentator is just the storyteller – if a commentator ever thinks they're the event, they're in trouble. If you ask me now which is the greatest game I've been at, it was the last World Cup final. Kylian Mbappe scores a hat-trick and loses to Lionel Messi – they created the ultimate story, it was the most remarkable match. What you were maybe going to say, and nothing to do with what I said, but before the start of the 2010 World Cup, when you approached the stadium in Johannesburg and saw South Africa, such a divided nation, so apparently united with a sense of togetherness and pride, it was joyful. If you could have bottled that for the world and said, 'This is how we should be', it would be a better place. Then a young kid from Soweto scores a belter – I think it's one of the most meaningful goals ever scored.

You famously said Siphiwe Tshabalala's stunner was a "Goal for South Africa, goal for all Africa". In those moments, how do you find the right words?
The one thing you don't do is write it down beforehand, because it'll sound like you have







Top to bottom Drury's big break with Leeds at the Camp Nou; "It's a great honour" to take over from Martin Tyler; "the most remarkable game of football"

“IF YOU COULD HAVE BOTTLED THAT JOY IN SOUTH AFRICA AND SAID, ‘THIS IS HOW WE SHOULD ALL BE’, THE WORLD WOULD BE A BETTER PLACE”



Above The 2010 World Cup began with “one of the most meaningful goals ever scored”

done. That’s not to say that you can’t have a think that there could be a moment, and to prime yourself to be ready for it. But if you try to pre-conceive a moment, it won’t quite turn out how you thought it would while you were sat in your hotel room the night before. I guess you have to trust an instinct to kick in, then ride the moment. The greatest example of that in domestic broadcasting was Martin Tyler with the Sergio Aguero goal. You could have sat in your hotel room thinking, ‘What am I going to say when Manchester City get the goal that wins the league?’. They only had to beat QPR, it was going to happen, so you’d have thought, ‘When Edin Dzeko wraps it up by making it 3-0 in the 87th minute, what am I going to say?’ But whatever you thought of wouldn’t have ticked all the boxes, would it? That’s why “I swear you’ll never see anything like this ever again” was wonderful, as Martin couldn’t possibly have seen that coming. The best work one does is spontaneous.

How satisfying is it when you commentate on a great moment, you nail it and people remember your words fondly?

It’s lovely, I can’t deny it. For every 100 goals, there’ll be seven or eight where you sit in the car afterwards and think, ‘Argh...’ There’ll be 85 that are OK, and maybe a couple that are moments. Most goals are just another goal – you must be careful not to try to make every goal sound like the mightiest event, because if everything is special, nothing is special. It’s nice when a special one comes along, though – especially if you get it right.

Have you ever spoken to Tshabalala about the goal you commentated on?

Yeah, 10 years after Tshabalala’s goal – it was during lockdown and I was asked to appear on South African radio. They got me on one line and him on the other, we spoke to each other and it was lovely, as he’s a humble guy. I was the English commentator for English television, and it was quite exciting to think that mine was the version of the goal that he’d become conscious of. If ever there’s an example of how sport can do what nothing else can, then that was it – a man from such modest roots being rocketed into the public consciousness in that way.

You’re known for your poetic style. Where does that come from, and do you have any background in literature?

I don’t, and I wouldn’t want anyone to think that I’ve attempted it or affected it. I’ve never called myself poetic, but if it comes over that way, I guess it’s just evolved and happened. I’m not a voracious reader, but I’ve always loved the English language and it’s partly to do with becoming a bit bored of myself! I’ve done countless games, and there are only so many ways to describe a centre-half heading the ball and somebody scoring, so I suppose I try to challenge myself to find other ways of expressing myself. On a good day it works, on a bad day there’ll be people screaming at the TV screen saying, ‘Shut it, will you?’ [*Laughs*] ▸

"I DIDN'T KNOW WHO HAD SCORED FOR ROMA, SO NEEDED TO FIND A LINE TO FILL THE TIME – IT WAS A FLUKE, BUT A NICE ONE"

Your commentary on the Manolas goal for Roma against Barcelona was the perfect example of finding those poetic words at the right time.
It was a fluke in a way! [*Laughs*] My planets aligned – I was very relaxed, because to my mind, everyone was watching Manchester City against Liverpool in the other Champions League game that night, so I was on a freebie really. Messi was playing for Barcelona, it was a delightful evening in Rome and there was absolutely no chance of Roma coming back from 4-1 behind. I thought, 'I'm a lucky boy, I'm at the Stadio Olimpico watching a high level football match'. It was only when Roma got to within one goal that I started to think, 'I'd better crank this up a bit, because if they get another one this is a massive story'. Then this centre-half heads home a corner at the near post. The honest truth is – and every commentator will identify with this – I didn't know who'd scored. I had to hang on for the close-up, so I needed to find a line to fill the time and it was "Roma have risen from their ruins". Then I discovered that it was a Greek player and thought, 'What do I know about Greece?' Then the rest of it simply happened! It was a fluke, but a nice fluke.

As the years have gone on, you've formed a cult following among football supporters. What has that been like?
I've been told that several times, but I'm not on social media and I try my best to shut it out because reaction affects you, whether it's positive or negative. If you feel a great wave of applause for doing something in a certain way one week, then think, 'I'll do that again next week', you're asking for trouble. Likewise I'm not very thick skinned, so if I get adverse reaction it completely cuts me up.

A Kenyan comedian called Arap Uria even produces viral videos, mimicking your best commentary in tribute to you.
I've been really flattered by it, actually. I was able to meet him at the World Cup last year and he's a beautiful, humble guy. He's funny – I said to him, "I wish I was as good as you are!" To be honest, his videos been very good for me. [*Smiles*]

You provided commentary lines for the *Pro Evolution Soccer* video game, too. How did you find that?
That was an entire week of sitting in a booth shouting! [*Laughs*] Don't get the idea that it's glamorous work, but it's a great brand to be a part of and we have fun. We drink too much coffee and churn it out!





Have there been any other weird moments, perhaps being spotted in the most unlikely of locations?
The great Desmond Lynam once said to me, "Drury, you're very lucky, because you get the thrill of live broadcasting, but you can walk into Sainsbury's and nobody knows who the hell you are!" That's absolutely true, and I've got no aspiration to become well known – the extent I am now, I'm not all that comfortable with, truthfully. However, I still play a little bit of semi-geriatric cricket. Once in a while I can call a single, and the opposition will look over at me and say, "Aren't you...?" Things happen occasionally, but let's not get carried away – it doesn't happen as much as for Gary Neville and Jamie Carragher!

Top and above "When Sky come calling, you don't say no"; Roma's Greek God leaves Leo & Co in ruins

How did it feel when you were asked to join Sky? Even though you were already in a good job working for NBC, is it a role you just don't say no to?
Exactly it – the truth is, I was perfectly happy and comfortable doing what I was doing, and this has thrown everything up in the air. But when the call comes, you don't say no. Since the Premier League began, Sky has been the market leader. It's a big thrill to take this on.

***Super Sunday* is something that so many people have grown up with.**
That's what makes it the top job, though it's a job I've needed to go into respectfully, as 4pm or 4.30pm on a Sunday has sounded like Martin Tyler for as long as anyone can remember – he set the bar. In a sense that's my problem because whatever I do, like me or not, I'm not going to be Martin. I think Sky have hired me to be me, that's the message I get, but I know that I'm being invited into people's homes and if you enter someone's house for the first time, you don't charge in and kick the furniture over.

Have you been able to talk to Martin since you took the job?
Yes, when it was all happening we exchanged very amicable texts. I've been lucky that I've worked alongside him for many years, seeing him at games each week. While I'm sure he'd love to have stayed until he was 177 because he's football mad in the best possible way, I'm happy to believe that I have his blessing, and that's important. He said, "Go and make it your own", which was a nice thing to say.

It feels like you have the same passion for commentary today as when you started?
I'm so lucky to do it. Behind playing – we all wish we could do that, but if you'd seen me play you'd know I couldn't! – it's got to be the most thrilling job in the game. You're a part of it, you get to articulate your feelings about a match and I'll honestly say there isn't one game I turn up for that I'm not excited about. If you're doing 11th versus 12th in the middle of April, with nothing riding on it, and you're thinking, 'Why am I here?', just look around at the 40,000 or 50,000 fans who have spent £40 or £50 to be at the match. It matters to a lot of people – every game has a narrative and it's fun to be telling that story.

What are your primary ambitions for your time with Sky?
I'm 55 now – if I do as many years as Martin I'll be 86, so I think that's improbable. I just want to enjoy it. I'm a human being – I had nerves before my first commentary on Sky, but a couple of pals told me, "Listen, you're crazy if you go into this with anything other than an attitude that says, 'Come on, you've got here, you've done 30 years and reached this point, for goodness sake enjoy it'." That's what I want to do – have some fun.

Watch 128 live matches on Sky Sports & NOW this season. Sky will continue to be the home of the Premier League – bringing fans the best in class for analysis, presenters and production

SUGAR DADDY

Alan Sugar faced El Tel in court and angry fans in the stands during an eventful nine-year spell as Spurs chairman, which featured plenty of chances for him to hone his "You're fired!" catchphrase...

Words Richard Edwards

The afterglow of Tottenham Hotspur's most recent FA Cup triumph faded quickly. It was the summer of 1991, Spurs had captured football's oldest competition for a record eighth time, and yet the club was in a total mess.

Though a debt of £20 million seems piffling today, back in '91 it represented a crippling millstone around Tottenham's neck. Worse still, the financial lifeline due from selling Paul Gascoigne, with Lazio offering a world-record £8.5m fee, had just been jeopardised by Gazza injuring himself at Wembley with an extraordinarily bad tackle on Nottingham Forest's 21-year-old full-back Gary Charles, who ironically got to his feet immediately. Spurs needed money and fast.


Their saviour was a former barrow boy from the East End. Alan Sugar had made a fortune with his electronics company Amstrad, and now he came to White Hart Lane to stabilise Spurs' parlous finances.

Terry Venables sat alongside Sugar in his opening press conference that June. The former Barcelona head honcho had just masterminded Tottenham to their record-breaking FA Cup final triumph over Brian Clough's Forest, but he found the boardroom even more alluring than the dugout and moved upstairs to become chief executive. In Sugar's words: "He'll look after the 11 players on the pitch; I'll look after the £11m in the bank." What could possibly go wrong?

"EVERY FIGURE HAD MINUS IN FRONT OF IT"

It's fitting that Sugar would later become best-known for *The Apprentice,* because when he walked through the doors at White Hart Lane 32 years ago, there wouldn't have been a better setting for a reality television show – specifically, on how not to run a football club.

Throughout the 1980s, the decade that created the yuppie, Spurs had blurred the boundaries between football and business. ▸


ALAN
SUGAR

It was the first English club to fully embrace the sport's commercial opportunities, an attitude which prompted Keith Burkinshaw to swap north London for the Middle East in 1984. With that year's UEFA Cup under his belt and back-to-back FA Cup wins to start the decade, Burkinshaw was Spurs' most successful manager since Bill Nicholson, yet he left to manage Bahrain's national team lamenting, "Spurs have become a business rather than a football club."

The previous August, Tottenham had spent £100,000 on a promotional campaign, not long after announcing their intention to float the club on the stock exchange. During the months before Burkinshaw's shock exit, the UEFA Cup final his last game in charge, Spurs became the first football club in the world to sell match tickets on a credit card hotline. By 1991, this brave new world had morphed into a far more dangerous frontier.

"The club was on the verge of bankruptcy," says ex-Spurs goalkeeper Erik Thorstvedt. "I was doing some training at the gym at White Hart Lane and the club secretary was showing some potential investors around. The previous regime had miscalculated the cost of expanding the stands and also set up other companies under the Tottenham umbrella. I think there was a travel company, a women's fashion boutique – stuff like that. They were supposed to change the club's fortunes on the field, but they had done the complete opposite. Every figure had a minus in front of it."

Such dreadful business decisions wouldn't have looked out of place on *The Apprentice*, and the cast Sugar brought in alongside him would also be recognisable to BBC viewers a generation later. Nick Hewer, who would be a mainstay of the programme for 10 years before ditching the boardroom for the comfy *Countdown* studio, and fellow familiar face Claude Littner each played a role in one of the most entertaining, if ultimately unfulfilling, periods in Tottenham's history.

"He has known Mr Venables on and off over the years and, although I wouldn't say they're great pals, they have a mutual respect for each other's achievements," Hewer told *The Daily Telegraph* ahead of Sugar's takeover being finalised. It wasn't exactly a ringing endorsement, but with Spurs in a deep hole, chairman Irving Scholar had precious few avenues left to explore.

Sugar bought the club while Robert Maxwell – the former MP, media tycoon, fraudster and inspiration for a Bond villain, Elliot Carver in *Tomorrow Never Dies* – circled. However, Cap'n Bob's involvement with both Oxford United and Derby County made any takeover difficult, if not impossible.

Below "This is my gaff now" **Bottom** Sugar and El Tel didn't see eye to eye





For Sugar and Venables, the plan was to buy a share stake which would provide the basis for a full-scale takeover of the club. Shares in Tottenham had been suspended the previous October. "Their main target is the 37 per cent stake held by Mr Paul Bobroff, ex-chairman of the Spurs holding company, and Mr Irving Scholar, the club chairman," wrote *The Daily Telegraph*'s business editor.

It was a successful ploy. Soon, Sugar had the keys to the palace – or at least a ground that had seen far better days and an FA Cup-winning team that was about to split up.

THE START OF A NEW ERA

Central to Spurs' financial future was selling the one player capable of bringing the new regime any silverware. Gascoigne had arrived at the Lane in 1988, when he was just 21, for £2.2m – a huge sum 35 years ago. "I believe Spurs are ready to win things, and obviously it's the title they'll be after," he declared after signing a five-year deal – a bold statement, given they hadn't threatened to do so since winning the Double in 1961.

Three years later, the title couldn't have been further from the thoughts of the club's new hierarchy. Tottenham had just finished 10th, 34 points behind their league-winning rivals Arsenal, and their star was off. For the incoming owners, Lazio's hefty bid assumed even heftier financial significance.

The fly in the ointment was the cruciate ligament Gascoigne had ruptured thanks to his moment of madness against Forest at Wembley. In fact, it was two moments: the pumped-up midfielder had already stuck his studs into Garry Parker's chest, 43 seconds into the FA Cup final. He could have done with team-mate Gary Lineker repeating his previous summer's temple-tapping 'have a word with him' advice to his boss; instead, Gazza received a gentle chiding from the smiling referee and annihilated Gary Charles 15 minutes later. Forced off on a stretcher before he could target Gary Crosby for the hat-trick, Gascoigne went unpunished by the referee but not by karma. He was injured for the entire 1991-92 campaign.

After the 24-year-old's recovery was held up by the physical ramifications of a nightclub incident, Lazio gave him until May 31, 1992 to prove his fitness. Otherwise, the deal was dead. Benfica eagerly waited in the wings. Ever the optimist, chief executive Venables insisted the club would survive even if the deadline were missed. It was touch and go but eventually Gazza did move to Lazio – for a reduced fee of £5.5m.

Walking into the mayhem was Darren Anderton, the Portsmouth winger signed by Spurs after the 1991-92 season. Now living in Florida, he has watched Lord Sugar's TV fame from afar.

"I haven't seen him for a couple of years, but watching the show I think, 'Yeah, he's pretty much playing himself!'," the former England man laughs to *FFT*. "I had a lot of dealings with him, as I stayed throughout his time at Spurs and didn't end up going to Manchester United [in 1995].

"He gave me a pretty good contract and then I got the injuries. He was so frustrated by that, and probably by the fact that Spurs was the only thing he hadn't been successful at, because he wanted it so much."

If Sugar had taken the helm at Tottenham during a perfect storm in 1991, then by 1992 the headwinds battering Spurs were nearing hurricane force. Managed by the returning Peter Shreeves – appointed by Venables as his successor – they took 16 points from the opening seven games of the Sugar era, with Lineker scoring 11 goals in that period, but somehow still contrived to finish 15th in the final First Division table. That summer, Gazza went to Italy, Lineker to Japan, and Shreeves to the Job Centre.

But Sugar was about to benefit from one of the biggest breaks imaginable. As plans for the Premier League unfolded, he managed to secure himself a crucial role in shaping the future of football.

"THE WHOLE THING WAS A BIT HAPHAZARD"

Remarkable as it sounds for a league that attracted broadcast rights of £4.8bn in May 2021, there was uncertainty whether the Premier League would be a huge success or costly failure. As late as December 1991, Gordon McKeag – a Newcastle director and chairman of the Football League's six-man steering group – commented, "It's little short of a disgrace that things have been mooted for so long and no decisions taken.

"I'd be happy to talk about restructuring a Football League that still retains the present First Division clubs."

Sugar had been a key figure in the growth of Rupert Murdoch's Sky empire, having bagged the contract to provide the satellite dishes. For the Hackney-born entrepreneur, it was the extension of an empire that had begun with a business manufacturing and distributing hi-fi equipment. Amstrad (Alan Michael Sugar Trading) was publicly listed in 1980, and by 1986 was producing one of the world's first low-cost PCs, revolutionising the technology market in Europe. In 1988, the company turned a profit of £150m and was valued at £1.2bn on the stock exchange.

When Murdoch came knocking to talk Sky dishes, with details of a potential agreement supposedly scribbled on a napkin over lunch, life could not have been sweeter for Sugar. *The Guardian* reported in February 1991 that satellite dishes made up 28 per cent of Amstrad's sales.

Meanwhile, the wrangling over English football's future continued. Although Sugar explained his potential conflict of interest, as a club owner who also supplied the satellite dishes to the firm aiming to win exclusive TV rights to the new first division, those charged ▶

"AS PLANS FOR THE NEW PREMIER LEAGUE UNFOLDED, SUGAR SECURED HIMSELF A KEY ROLE IN SHAPING THE FUTURE OF FOOTBALL"



Below The cup-winning team soon disbanded, as Lineker went to Japan and Gazza to Italy



with deciding the breakaway Premier League agreed that he could vote.

With ITV set to win the bid, Sugar famously called Sky from the clubs' meeting at a hotel lobby and told them to "blow them out of the water". Sky promptly blew ITV out of the water and the Premier League was given the go-ahead. By a single vote.

The rest, of course, is history. Sky's losses in 1992 were £47m. A year later, the company turned a profit of £62m. As riches poured into football, the finances of the clubs, owners, agents and players involved also changed beyond all recognition.

As that money tap was turned on, Sugar's trusted confidantes faced the thankless task of trying to instil a dose of professionalism at White Hart Lane.

"I'd spent a couple of seasons in Germany and there was a lot more emphasis on how you should live as a player; what you ate and drank," recalls Thorstvedt. "In England, that was very different. The clubs were organised differently, too. There were maybe seven or eight people involved in running Borussia Monchengladbach, but at Tottenham there were loads of people everywhere! The whole thing was a bit haphazard.

"Alan Sugar was slightly shocked when he came in, as he was a proper businessman. That's where things slowly started to unravel between him and Terry Venables."

Rumours were spreading that if staff in administrative positions made a phone call from the White Hart Lane landline that was likely to cost more than a pound, they needed to get permission from the boss. At the same time, Sugar claimed Venables was bringing in new players without consulting him – nor the balance sheet.

By the summer of 1993, the pair were engaging in open warfare that would end in court, watched in the public gallery by vocal Spurs fans. Venables laid bare all the issues.

"I told Sugar early on that he stood little chance of making much money out of Spurs for a long time," explained the outgoing soon-to-be England manager. "We had to spend money to sign players. He told me to bugger off." If only *The Apprentice*'s producers had chosen that as the main catchphrase instead of, "You're fired."

Nor did bosses survive for very long under Sugar. Shreeves lasted a single season, while Ray Clemence and Doug Livermore arrived as joint-managers and were shown the door just a year later. Then in the summer of 1993, Ossie Ardiles came home.





Top to bottom
Sugar made his name selling electronic gear; Murdoch's Sky changed the game, aided by Amstrad; open Spurs warfare with Mrs Razor

OSSIE'S DREAM BECOMES A NIGHTMARE

Ardiles had been a Spurs legend as a player, joining in the wake of Argentina's 1978 World Cup triumph and going on to wow fans for a decade. His return as manager was popular, helping him to escape the sack even when his side lost seven consecutive league games at the turn of the year, then finished 15th. Going into the following season, after USA 94, Sugar bought Ardiles a constellation of World Cup stars.

"It finally looked as though we were going places," Anderton tells *FFT*. "He got Jurgen Klinsmann in, [Ilie] Dumitrescu and [Gica] Popescu – suddenly we were the team that everybody wanted to watch. We started the trend of getting the best foreign players to come to the Premier League."

Playing a formation that seemed as if it were conceived on the playground, Ardiles' Spurs attacked, attacked, attacked. And then attacked some more. They began the season with a bang, kicking off with a 4-3 win over Sheffield Wednesday at Hillsborough – the first of three wins in their first four matches, only losing narrowly to Manchester United. Klinsmann scored 10 times in his first seven appearances, while a 6-3 goalfest won away at Watford in the League Cup only added to the new-found glamour of the 'Fab Five': Klinsmann, Dumitrescu, Anderton, Nicky Barmby and Teddy Sheringham. The football was glamorous, anyway.

But predictably, it didn't take too long for this gung-ho approach to misfire, then self-destruct. After a 5-2 October capitulation at Manchester City's Maine Road was followed four days later by a humbling 3-0 cup defeat to Notts County, who would finish bottom of the second tier that season, Ardiles received the two-word message heard by numerous *Apprentice* candidates.

The appointment of Gerry Francis heralded an immediate improvement in both solidity and results – Spurs' points tally under him was second only to Manchester United for the rest of the campaign – but any hopes of Sugar's reign bringing long-term success were dashed by a mass exodus.

It was led by Klinsmann. The forward had signed a one-year deal at Tottenham with a two-year option, but returned to Germany after the first to join Bayern Munich. Sugar was livid. The Spurs chairman – who coined the phrase 'Carlos Kickaball' to describe the stereotypical foreign mercenary he perceived as clogging up Premier League teams' squads – appeared on GMTV and threw Klinsmann's shirt away, saying he wouldn't even use it to clean his car.

"Jurgen stayed for a year, Popescu stayed for a year, Nicky Barmby left and I picked up the injuries," recalls Anderton, reflecting on Ardiles' reign. "He was really unlucky. If that side had stayed together, then who knows?"

THE MAN WHO SHOT BAMBI

Yet Sugar's finest achievement during that period came off the pitch. In May 1994, the FA charged Spurs with misconduct relating

"SUPPORTERS HAD TAKEN VENABLES' SIDE IN THE CLUB'S UNCIVIL WAR, SOME EVEN STAGING PROTESTS AT SUGAR'S HOUSE"

to irregular payments to players in the '80s, predating his arrival. The punishment was stunning: a £600,000 fine, 12-point deduction in the Premier League and one-year ban from competing in the FA Cup.

There was no danger of Sugar taking it lying down. Saying he viewed the FA's treatment as "a deliberate vendetta against our club and against me personally", he got to work. An initial appeal saw the points deduction reduced to just six, but the fine increased to £1.5m and the FA Cup suspension remaining in place. Another appeal, this time heard by an independent arbiter, scrapped the points ban entirely and allowed Tottenham to enter the FA Cup after all.

Peterborough and Swindon had previously recorded similar misdemeanours and been relegated. Sugar had surged into battle and won, and the fans loved it.

Whether the fans loved him was another matter. Only the previous year, supporters had – along with a number of players – taken Venables' side in the club's uncivil war. Some, including centre-back Neil Ruddock's then-wife Sarah, even staged protests outside the owner's house, leading Sugar to quip in May 1993 that he "felt like the man who'd shot Bambi". His mother, Alan. You felt like you'd shot Bambi's *mother*. He would later leave the Lilywhites faithful aghast when he did the unthinkable and hired Arsenal legend George Graham as manager.

Sugar always did things his own way, and if he was outspoken when he arrived at White Hart Lane, then as 1997 rolled around he had even less interest in keeping the peace. In a speech to the Oxford Union in October of that year, he made no attempt to conceal his contempt for the governance of the sport.

"The FA is like Madame Tussauds," he said. "Whenever they come to our place, we tell them to keep walking so we can distinguish between them and the waxworks. They are totally out of their depth. They haven't a clue – none of them."

Was he finished? Was he heck.

"What we really need is reform at that level. They are totally out to lunch. The way the FA is run, it takes about 900 people to decide whether to change referees' shirts from green to brown. I'm not kidding."

Closer to home, however, there was disquiet in the Spurs dressing room.

"When I'd been out injured for about three months, he asked me to sit on the bench, to give the crowd a lift," remembers Anderton. "I needed to be held back, but he said that if I gave the crowd a lift, I wouldn't be required anyway. We were 3-0 up at half-time and he came in smiling as if to say, 'Look at me; look what I've done'. Then, with 10 minutes to go, it was 3-2 and Gerry Francis brought me on. I was scared s**tless to use my right foot."

Sheringham's patience also snapped when Claude Littner ventured in post-match. "He came in and said, "Unlucky, guys" and Teddy lost his mind," explains Anderton. "He said, 'Unlucky?! How about you sort that f**king pitch out, so we can play?' To be fair, the pitch was a sandpit. Poor old Claude didn't really know what to say."

As results continued to nosedive, Francis lost his job and was replaced by Christian Gross, the Swiss gaffer who famously turned up to his first press conference brandishing a Travelcard to highlight his admiration for London. Deeply unpopular with Tottenham's players, he would last just nine months before Graham was, to the fans' horror, brought in to engineer an upturn in the club's fortunes.

Under Graham's guidance, Spurs did lift their only silverware in Sugar's reign, winning the 1999 League Cup Final against Leicester thanks to Allan Nielsen's injury-time header. As Christmas 2000 neared, Sugar sold his controlling stake in the club, receiving £22m from ENIC and Daniel Levy for 27 per cent of his shares. It wasn't until June 2007, and the month before he sold Amstrad to BSkyB for £125m, that he flogged the remainder of his 14.6 per cent stake in Tottenham Hotspur for £25m, taking the total profit from his initial investment in the club to £39m.

Venables was right all along: it would take Sugar a long time to make much money out of Spurs. For Tottenham supporters' dreams of a first FA Cup triumph since May 1991, the month prior to Sugar's arrival at the club, the wait has been longer still.



Below Sugar brought Ossie to Tottenham, but the gung-ho approach didn't last long

THE FORTY CLUB

It's bloody hard to score 40 league goals in a season – a lifetime has passed since anybody did it in an English top-tier campaign – so Erling Haaland, Manchester City's goal monster, may soon join an exclusive club. Meet its members, from mono-balled Dixie to Old Big 'Ed himself...

Words Harry Pearson

Since the formation of the Football League in 1888, just 38 players have reached the remarkable milestone of plundering 40 English league goals in a single season. As *FourFourTwo* goes to press, Erling Haaland is bidding to become No.39, which would make him – incredibly – only the third person in the past 50 years to achieve the spectacular feat.

What's more, neither of those two most recent goal-getters did it at the top level. Haaland, just 22 and in his debut season in the league, would be only the second player since the Second World War to register 40-plus efforts in an English top-flight campaign. Even true greats such as Gary Lineker and Thierry Henry never managed more than 30, and the modern-day Premier League record is shared by Andy Cole and Alan Shearer with 'just' 34 (Mohamed Salah's 32 being the most in the 38-game era post-1995).

The list of those who did shatter the 40-goal barrier has legendary figures rubbing shoulders with lower-division heroes barely known beyond a 30-mile radius of their home grounds. Each one is special, from the first (Jimmy Cookson in the 1925-26 Division Three North, the Chesterfield centre-forward smashing No.40 just before Blackburn's Ted Harper did likewise up in Division One) to the last (Fulham's Aleksandar Mitrovic in 2021-22).

The timing of Cookson and Harper's 40+ campaigns was not coincidental. The impetus for goal-scoring sparked in the summer of 1925 with a revision to Law 11 in the Laws of the Game: the offside rule. Prior to that, there always had to be three defenders between the attacker and the goal when the ball was played to them. This regulation was ruthlessly exploited by defenders after the First World War; most notably, Bill McCracken, a Northern Irish full-back with Newcastle, perfected an offside trap that snared forwards like a web catching flies. Countless defences soon copied his example. Goals dwindled, attendances dropped, football authorities panicked and the new law – just two defenders between attacker and goal – came into force for the 1925-26 season.

The change was instant and dramatic. Goals in the English top flight increased from 1,192 in 1924-25 to 1,703 a season later; from an average of 2.58 per match to a crowd-swelling 3.89. Until then, the largest haul in an English league season had been 39 goals by Darlington's David Brown, of Scotland. Such totals suddenly became commonplace in the period.

The 40-goal-season strikers had arrived.

DIXIE DEAN

William 'Dixie' Dean was the epitome of the rugged British centre-forward: strong as a rhino, and often playing like one.

If you want to know how rough the game was in Dixie's era, consider this: playing in a reserves match for Tranmere when he was 16, Dean was challenged so ferociously that he lost a testicle. He just laughed it off (not literally). Still, that wasn't so surprising. After all, this was a lad who had voluntarily gone to Borstal at the age of 11 because the football facilities in the school for young delinquents were the best in Birkenhead; "I told the other lads that I'd got done for stealing, so I fitted in," he later recalled.

Dean had jet-black hair, a dark complexion and a wide, toothy grin. Contrary to a popular myth, his nickname seems to have been the corruption of a childhood tag, 'Digsy', rather than an allusion to the Confederate states of the American South. His strapping torso was set atop a pair of legs that might have been carved from tree trunks, giving him a powerful shot that Dean reputedly honed by kicking giant rats against a wall during night shifts as an apprentice fitter. It was his heading, though, that drew gasps from fans, team-mates and opponents. The well-built centre-forward had a vertical leap so forceful it suggested rocket boots. Then he hung in the air, majestically, before thumping the ball so percussively with his bonce that Everton supporters joked he had steel in his forehead.

Dean joined Everton – his boyhood idols – from Tranmere for £3,000 in March 1925. His career was almost curtailed in the summer of 1926 by a motorcycle smash that brought him a fractured skull and broken jaw; doctors feared he'd never play again, but experience had given Dean real testicular fortitude.

While his 1927-28 season started steadily enough, it was on October 8 that he hinted of things to come, by hammering home all five Everton goals as they thrashed Manchester United 5-2 at Goodison Park. It was the first of five hat-tricks he'd score in the campaign.

The previous season, Middlesbrough's George Camsell had struck 59 goals in the Second Division, a record so astounding people thought it would last forever. With three matches remaining – and having also missed three through injury – Dean was still eight short. But then he scored twice against Aston Villa. Then he rattled four past Burnley. Everton's closing encounter was at home to Arsenal: when Dean found the net twice in the opening six minutes to equal Camsell's tally, a new record looked inevitable. Yet time ticked by. Finally, with eight minutes left, he headed in Alex Troup's cross for Dixie's sixty.

Dean was still only 21. Though he'd never match 60 again, and nor will anybody else, his 44 goals in 1931-32 made him the only man to score 40-plus twice in the English top division. Bill Shankly said of him: "He belongs to the company of the supremely great, like Beethoven, Shakespeare and Rembrandt".

Dean believed that only Jesus Christ was capable of breaking his 60-goal record. The Saviour may have had many talents, but he was far less dangerous from crosses. ▸

Below Beethoven, Shakespeare and Rembrandt never looked this cool



THE TWENTIES

Ted Harper was the first to break the 40-goal barrier in Division One. He held the top-flight season scoring record for a whole year until Dixie Dean came by.

In between, George Camsell became the first of just five players in any English tier to hit a half-century of goals, totalling 59 despite missing Middlesbrough's first four games. Then, David Halliday – also the fastest to 100 goals in the English top tier, at least until Haaland does it in fewer than 101 games – became the second and last player to be outright top scorer in Scotland and England, by repeating his Dundee feat at Sunderland in 1928-29.

That season was fruitful for forwards – one in each tier struck 40. A whistlestop tour: in Division Two, Jimmy Hampson of Blackpool did it back-to-back before he died falling off a yacht; Jimmy McConnell, formerly of the Springfield Babes in the USA, was Carlisle's hero in Division Three North; and Luton's short-tempered Andy 'Ratty' Rennie hit 43 goals in the South.



Below left 100 goals in just 101 appearances for Happy Halliday **Below** Drake's speed was even more impressive if you consider the drag created by those shorts

TED DRAKE

Like another iconic Arsenal marksman, Ian Wright, Ted Drake had an unconventional path to greatness. The Southampton-born striker was rejected by Tottenham after a trial and got a job inspecting gas meters.

Drake was later spotted in non-league, at Winchester City, and Saints took him to the Second Division in 1931. He was an instant success, and in 1934 he joined Arsenal for £6,500 having rebuffed a previous approach.

The Gunners were a superb side, managed by George Allison – formerly a commentator – after Herbert Chapman's sudden death in January 1934 and marshalled by the brilliant, baggy-shorted, Scottish playmaker Alex James, with the graceful Cliff Bastin scoring freely from the wing. Their broad-shouldered new signing lacked the flair and guile of his celebrated team-mates, but made up for it with speed, vigour and determination. Drake was cheery and positive, and also seemed to be impervious to pain. In 1938, he carried on playing against Brentford with a broken wrist and eight stitches in a head wound that had required him to be carried off unconscious.

Quick and direct, Drake was imperious in the air and had a thunderous shot on either foot. He took a simple approach to the game: when he got the ball, he tried to whack it into the net. It proved to be a prosperous formula. In 1934-35 – his first full season at Highbury – the centre-forward helped the Gunners to a third successive league title by racking up some phenomenal numbers in the first half of the campaign. In November he fired four goals in a game in successive weeks, after already registering three other hat-tricks. By the start of December, Drake was averaging just under 1.5 goals per game and there was talk of Dixie Dean's record being in jeopardy. He promptly tailed off, however, and ended the season with 42 goals from 41 games.

The following term, Drake notched seven times in an Arsenal win away at Aston Villa – still a division record. He'd score 139 goals for Arsenal before war brought the curtain down on his career when he was still at his peak. In the 1950s he'd manage Chelsea to their first league title, bringing through a crop of young talents. One of them was Jimmy Greaves...



HONOURS' LIST

No place here for Rushie, Rooney nor Ronnie – just the 40-goal-season wonders, with a surprising number called Ted

1926	Ted Harper (Blackburn)	**43**	Div 1
1926	Jimmy Cookson (Chesterfield)	**44**	Div 3 (North)
1927	George Camsell (Middlesbrough)	**59**	Div 2
1927	Albert Whitehurst (Rochdale)	**44**	Div 3 (North)
1927	David Morris (Swindon)	**47**	Div 3 (South)
1928	Dixie Dean (Everton)	**60**	Div 1
1929	David Halliday (Sunderland)	**43**	Div 1
1929	Jimmy Hampson (Blackpool)	**40**	Div 2
1929	Jimmy McConnell (Carlisle)	**42**	Div 3 (North)
1929	Andrew Rennie (Luton)	**43**	Div 3 (South)
1930	Jimmy Hampson (Blackpool)	**45**	Div 2
1931	Pongo Waring (Aston Villa)	**49**	Div 1
1931	Jimmy Dunne (Sheffield United)	**41**	Div 1
1931	Peter Simpson (Crystal Palace)	**46**	Div 3 (South)
1932	Dixie Dean (Everton)	**44**	Div 1
1932	Allan Hall (Lincoln)	**42**	Div 3 (North)
1932	Clarrie Bourton (Coventry)	**49**	Div 3 (South)
1932	Frank Newton (Fulham)	**43**	Div 3 (South)
1933	Clarrie Bourton (Coventry)	**40**	Div 3 (South)
1934	Pat Glover (Grimsby)	**42**	Div 2

JOHN CHARLES

Built like a comic strip strongman, 6ft 3in Welshman John Charles was a man of intimidating stature. "He was just so dominatingly *big*", English full-back Jimmy Armfield recalled with a touch of awe.

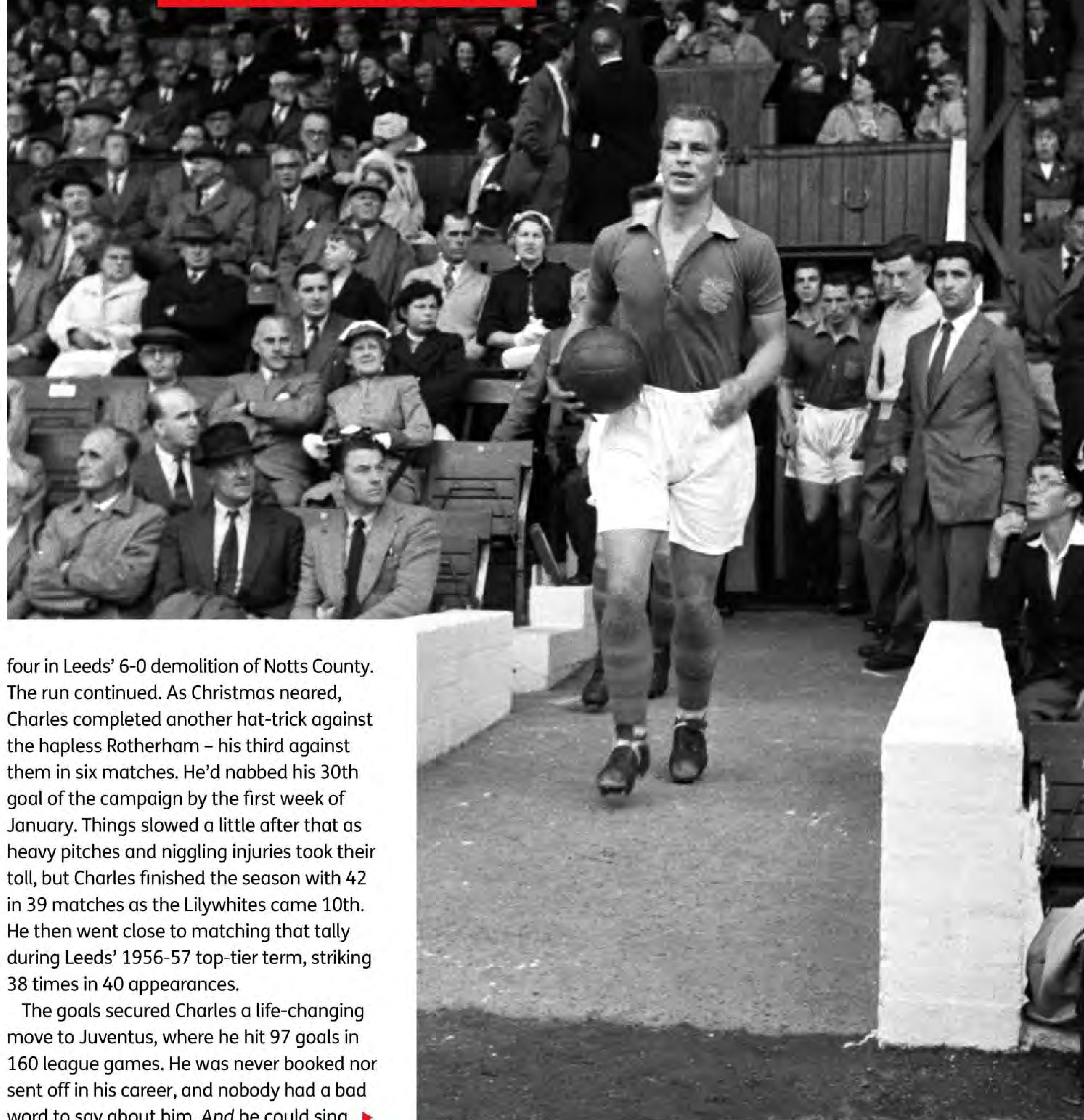
People couldn't help noticing his size, but there was more to the Swansea giant than 14 stones of finely-honed musculature. Charles was nimble, quick, with good feet. A neat and clever passer of the ball, he read the game wonderfully, reacted fast and was so calm that he seemed to exist in his own pocket of time. That he was magnificent in the air goes without saying: so great was his power, it was said that he could head a ball further than many could kick one. Charles' very presence lifted his team-mates. Jack Charlton, who played alongside him at Leeds, considered him the most effective player he ever encountered – "a team unto himself". Reporters tended to agree. The big man had such a massive influence at Elland Road, they began to call Leeds 'John Charles United'.

Charles had commenced his career at his hometown club, then relocated to Leeds as a 17-year-old. They were managed by an eccentric, one Major Frank Buckley, who gave his players ballroom dancing lessons and massages using whisky. Buckley played the young Charles at right-back and on the left side of midfield before eventually sticking him into the centre of the backline, where he was effective to the point that many seasoned pros soon deemed the towering teenager to be the finest centre-half in Britain.

It was only after the collosus returned from National Service in 1952 that Leeds, now coached by one of England's top forwards in Raich Carter, encouraged the Welshman to go up front. It was an inspired decision.

The 1953-54 Second Division season saw Charles go off like an atom bomb. He scored eight times in the opening three fixtures, including a hat-trick against Rotherham and four in Leeds' 6-0 demolition of Notts County. The run continued. As Christmas neared, Charles completed another hat-trick against the hapless Rotherham – his third against them in six matches. He'd nabbed his 30th goal of the campaign by the first week of January. Things slowed a little after that as heavy pitches and niggling injuries took their toll, but Charles finished the season with 42 in 39 matches as the Lilywhites came 10th. He then went close to matching that tally during Leeds' 1956-57 top-tier term, striking 38 times in 40 appearances.

The goals secured Charles a life-changing move to Juventus, where he hit 97 goals in 160 league games. He was never booked nor sent off in his career, and nobody had a bad word to say about him. *And* he could sing. ▸



"JACK CHARLTON CALLED JOHN CHARLES "A TEAM UNTO HIMSELF", SUCH WAS HIS HUGE INFLUENCE"

1934	Alf Lythgoe (Stockport)	46	Div 3 (North)
1934	Tommy Bamford (Wrexham)	44	Div 3 (North)
1935	Ted Drake (Arsenal)	42	Div 1
1937	Ted Hartson (Mansfield)	55	Div 3 (North)
1937	Joe Payne (Luton)	55	Div 3 (South)
1947	Clarrie Jordan (Doncaster)	41	Div 3 (North)
1952	Derek Dooley (Sheffield Wednesday)	46	Div 2
1954	John Charles (Leeds)	42	Div 2
1956	Ron Collins (Torquay)	40	Div 3 (South)
1957	Arthur Rowley (Leicester)	44	Div 2
1957	Ted Phillips (Ipswich)	42	Div 3 (South)
1958	Tommy Johnston (L Orient, Blackburn)	43	Div 2
1959	Brian Clough (Middlesbrough)	42	Div 2
1960	Cliff Holton (Watford)	42	Div 4
1961	Jimmy Greaves (Chelsea)	41	Div 1
1961	Terry Bly (Peterborough)	52	Div 4
1962	Roger Hunt (Liverpool)	41	Div 2
1966	Kevin Hector (Bradford PA)	44	Div 4
1971	Ted MacDougall (Bournemouth)	42	Div 4
1993	Guy Whittingham (Portsmouth)	42	Div 1 (new)
2022	Aleksandar Mitrovic (Fulham)	43	Championship

THE THIRTIES

Spare a little thought for Jimmy Dunne, Frank Newton and Tommy Bamford. The trio walloped 41, 43 and 44 goals respectively, yet still weren't divisional top scorers in this prolific decade.

Even with a record tally for an Irishman, Dunne couldn't top Tom 'Pongo' Waring of Aston Villa, who showed that Dixie Dean wasn't Birkenhead's only footballing phenomenon. Dean's own remarkable record looked under threat from Waring, who, by all accounts, rarely bothered to train and drank enormous quantities... of lemonade. 'Pongo' scored four goals on 1930-31's opening day and had 28 from 22 games but, slowed by injury, he ended up one short of 50 and 11 short of Dixie.

A year later, Fulham's Newton lost out to Coventry's Clarrie Bourton in Division Three South; Bourton then repeated the feat, as one of just three players to bag 40-plus league goals not once but twice. Finally, Wrexham's Bamford was second to Stockport's Alf Lythgoe, foreshadowing the 2021-22 National League. Sort of.

Below left Pongo: better than the nickname implies **Below** Cloughie? Difficult? Surely not **Right** "Greavsie's hogging the balls in training again"

BRIAN CLOUGH

George Camsell's 59 league goals in the 1926-27 season is the second-best tally in history, so you'd trust his scouting report rejecting a young striker. Fortunately, Ray Grant didn't, and Middlesbrough's youth coach signed Brian Clough anyway in 1955 from a village side, Great Broughton, who were managed by the local postwoman.

Young Big 'Ed had sharp features beneath a Woody Woodpecker quiff and skin so pale it made the moon look like Donald Trump. He had great positional sense and anticipation, and could volley thunderously using either foot. His record for Boro was ridiculous: across five full campaigns in an unimpressive outfit, his lowest league tally was 34.

Yet Clough was never popular. His quest for goals was so single-minded, it was said he'd shove better-placed team-mates out of the way to score. He refused to make runs taking him away from the penalty area, criticised others on the pitch and sulked after defeats.

Called arrogant, scathing and combative, Clough hit back. Boro were mired in Second Division mediocrity and he wondered if some of the club's old pros didn't prefer it that way, betting on themselves to lose to safeguard their earnings. Accusations led to fisticuffs, and when Clough was appointed captain in 1958, nine players signed a letter to directors asking for his removal. Fans took the majority view and, in the next home game, barracked their new skipper. He responded by scoring a hat-trick of shots from outside the box. This uncrushable self-belief would become clear during his career as a manager.

Clough's greatest season, 1958-59, came in these venomous surroundings. After getting off to a flyer with five goals in a 9-0 hiding of Brighton, he'd scored 13 after eight matches and 25 as of Boxing Day, including hat-tricks against Scunthorpe, Swansea and Brighton (again). He finished on 43; Boro finished 13th.

Clough requested a transfer every summer without fail, and having clocked up 204 goals in 222 matches, he left Boro for Sunderland in 1961. The £55,000 man bagged 29 league goals in his maiden campaign and had 24 by December in 1962-63, on course to surpass his best tally at Ayresome Park, but a collision with Bury's goalkeeper wrecked his knee and ended his career. His playing career, anyway...



"WHEN CLOUGH WAS MADE CAPTAIN, NINE PLAYERS ASKED THE CLUB FOR HIS REMOVAL"



JIMMY GREAVES

The embodiment of the new self-confident, working-class kids who would come to dominate British culture in the '60s, Jimmy Greaves was a Ray Davies of an inside forward; David Bailey in football boots. He had a smart haircut and a smarter wit, and with his flair as a striker accompanying his cheeky-geezer persona (broad grin, half-time fag, big nights "up west"), he proved a fans' favourite wherever he played.

'Greavsie' was a sensation. Sprightly and elegant, he'd glide over rutted, muddy turf as if on a cushion of air. He was also hard to knock off the ball, and could beat defenders with a body swerve or breeze past them using his swift footwork. Most of all, he was lethal in the penalty area and dangerous from the edge of it; his powerful left-footed shot was notable for a near-total lack of backlift, which meant goalkeepers couldn't set themselves.

Signed as a junior by Chelsea in 1956, he'd cracked home 114 goals for the youth team before Ted Drake handed the 17-year-old his first-team debut in 1957-58's curtain-raiser. He scored, of course, turning in a dazzling performance that Charles Buchan, of *Charles Buchan's Football Monthly*, rated as the finest debut he'd ever seen. It was a sign of things to come. When Greaves smashed a hat-trick to sink Manchester City in November 1960, it took him to 100 league goals. He was 20.



That 1960-61 season would be the most productive of Greaves' career. It would be his last at Stamford Bridge too, as Chelsea, in need of a rebuild, sold him to Milan against his wishes. In his farewell outing, at home to Nottingham Forest, the Blues' captain for the day added fuel to the fans' ire by scoring all four goals in a 4-3 victory, a last-minute winner taking his season tally to 41. He is, for the moment, still the last player to break the 40-goal barrier in England's top division.

Returning to England after unhappy times in Italy, he settled at White Hart Lane with a hat-trick on his debut. He was the league's top scorer three years running at Spurs, and twice came close to netting 40 once again.

For England, Greaves hit 44 goals in just 57 caps, but his needling of Alf Ramsey (Greaves tormented Ramsey by whistling *What's It All About, Alfie?* when he entered the dressing room, and wisecracked about the manager's strangulated attempts to speak like an army officer) meant his final international fixture occurred when he was only 27, after already missing the knockout stages in his country's World Cup triumph. Exile from the England team blighted his later career, and was likely a factor in his future struggles with alcohol, yet Greaves' club legacy remains. His record of 357 top-flight goals – some 150 more than Harry Kane to date – may never be broken. ▸

THE FORTIES AND FIFTIES

When league football recommenced in 1946-47 after a slightly unavoidable hiatus, goals were harder to come by.

Nobody in the top flight topped 40 in the '40s, as Clarrie Jordan alone reached the landmark for third-tier Doncaster. His feat of scoring in 10 successive league matches, in the first post-war season, has been repeated just four times in England.

The '50s were more fun. Derek Dooley, a galloping bull of a centre-forward, bludgeoned 46 Second Division goals for Sheffield Wednesday in 1951-52. Sadly, his career ended the very next season, as a broken leg turned gangrenous and had to be amputated when he was 23.

Tommy Johnston, meanwhile, had lost the use of one arm in a mining accident, which at least didn't preclude him from playing professional football. The Scot is the only player to spread 40-plus goals across two clubs in one campaign, for Leyton Orient and Blackburn in 1957-58.

The more memorable record, however, belongs to Arthur 'The Gunner' Rowley, who fired 44 for Leicester in 1956-57. With 434, Rowley is, quite simply, English football's all-time top league goalscorer.



Left Rowley is the man to beat **Above** A very proud winner of the Susan Boyle lookalike contest (Bournemouth & Poole edition)

TED MacDOUGALL

When Ted MacDougall left York City for Third Division Bournemouth in 1969, the deal was sealed by the chairman agreeing to meet his demand of £28 per week and a set of velvet curtains for his new house. It was a stretch for the south-coast club, who were so strapped for cash that their players had to use milk churns as weights.

MacDougall's first campaign at Dean Court brought 21 goals but also relegation, so the Inverness-born striker was put up for sale. Nobody wanted him. Bournemouth's new boss, former West Ham defender John Bond, didn't fancy the curly-haired No.9 much, either. Bond prized adaptability. The Scot was a classic goal-hanger. Inside the box, he was lethal; outside it, he was a beached shark.

With no money to spend, Bond made the best of what he had. Over the summer, he taught MacDougall how to find space and drummed into him that a forward of his size and shape – 5ft 10in and slight of build – had to make near-post runs rather than battle in the middle with elbow-happy centre-backs.

Initially suspicious, MacDougall was soon converted. Results were immediate. In the first seven matches of the 1970-71 season, he struck eight times. In the Cherries' next home game against Colchester, he hit all of his team's goals in a 4-1 victory. Fans began to call him 'Supermac' (Malcolm Macdonald, the forward who would become Supermac, was playing for fourth-tier Luton and miles behind MacDougall in the scoring standings).

Scouts started to show up, and Joe Mercer's Manchester City were rumoured to have bid £70,000 for him. MacDougall's clever flicks and blindside runs even drew comparisons with England World Cup winner Martin Peters.

In December 1970, Bournemouth reunited MacDougall and his old York pal, Phil Boyer – the double act duly formed one of the 1970s' classic smash-and-grab strike partnerships: Boyer was intelligent, quick and completely selfless, creating space, time and chances for the Scotsman. MacDougall (or MacDou-goal, as he was styled by headline writers and in his autobiography) finished on 42 league goals as Bournemouth secured promotion.

The following season, MacDougall scored 35 goals in the league and nine in a single game: an 11-0 FA Cup crushing of Margate, later huffing that he should have had more. He joined Manchester United, then logged impressive numbers at both Norwich and Southampton before returning to Dean Court.

THE SIXTIES AND BEYOND

With teams moving away from the old W-M formation and playing four across the defence – and often in midfield, too – the number of goals scored in English football began to shrink back to levels seen before 1925's revision of Law 11.

The most extraordinary performance of the '60s came from the unsung Terry Bly. The tall, gangly, ebullient East Anglian notched 52 goals, with seven hat-tricks, in Peterborough's first ever Football League campaign – a post-war record.

Other noteworthy performers included Watford's handsome hero, Cliff Holton (42 goals in 1959-60), and future England World Cup winner Roger Hunt, who netted 41 for Liverpool in their 1961-62 Second Division promotion season. And Kevin Hector of Bradford Park Avenue was just 21 when he banged in 44 goals over the 1965-66 campaign; the sharp, skilful striker went on to win three league titles at Derby and then become a postman.

In 57 years since, only three men have been inducted to The 40 Club. Last term, Aleksander Mitrovic's 43 Fulham strikes made the Serbian the club's sole member from outside the British Isles. So far...

Below For one season only, Guy was unstoppable... **Right** ...with a little help from Walsh

GUY WHITTINGHAM

Every fan of a certain age knows that Guy Whittingham bought himself out of the British Army to play professional football.

Rejected by several clubs as a teenager, Whittingham joined the army as a physical instructor in 1982. After a two-year stint in Germany, he returned to England, combining army life with featuring part-time for Yeovil. Knocking in 19 goals from 23 Glovers games caught Portsmouth's attention, and manager John Gregory offered the striker professional terms. Whittingham paid off the remainder of his army contract ("Pompey gave me the money back later") and made his pro debut, aged 24, at the start of the 1989-90 season.

Though small, Pompey's new man was so combative that fans labelled him 'Corporal Punishment'. He was certainly wholehearted, flinging himself about as if joy-riding inside a stolen body. Like the majority of tenacious, journeymen pros, Whittingham's exact skills were hard to pinpoint. He put himself about. He got into the right areas. That sort of thing.

There was nothing in Whittingham's history to prepare anyone for his golden campaign of 1992-93. His career record was little more than average, and he'd scored 11 goals from 37 appearances in his previous Pompey term. What happened next is anyone's guess.

Benefitting from the brilliance of his strike partner, the cavalier-haired former Spurs star Paul Walsh, as well as the tricky wide play of ex-England winger Mark Chamberlain and the probing passing of midfielder Alan McLaughlin, Whittingham briefly turned into the ultimate fox in the box. The ball went in off his boots, head, shins, knees and, more than once, his backside. It was harder for him to miss than score. He registered more than half of Pompey's goals; the highlight, a series of neat one-twos with Walsh that climaxed in Whittingham bashing the ball into Bristol Rovers' net. A club-record 42 goals surpassed the milestone set in 1926-27 by Wyndham 'Willie' Haines, nicknamed 'Farmer's Boy'.

Ironically, prolific Pompey missed out on automatic promotion to the Premier League on 'goals scored' (specifically, one) and lost in the play-offs to Leicester, who then lost to Swindon. Whittingham moved to Aston Villa that summer and never again reached 12 goals in a league campaign. A single-season superhero went back to being a regular Guy.





"LIKE MANY JOURNEYMEN PROS, WHITTINGHAM'S EXACT SKILLS WERE DIFFICULT TO PINPOINT"

After learning from Pep Guardiola as Man City skipper, Burnley's beloved boss is now ready to mix it with his old gaffer in a top-flight dugout. *FFT* speaks to those who know him – even those who introduced him to his wife...

IN GOOD



Words Leo Moynihan **Additional reporting** Grant Shub

KOMPANY



Vincent Kompany is surprising a lot of people – himself included.

"My passion is scoring goals," he told the Burnley squad in his first meeting after becoming their new manager in June 2022.

That might have surprised the likes of Ashley Barnes and Jay Rodriguez, who only had memories of Kompany the player being hellbent on preventing them during their tussles with Manchester City. "My passion is a team who are looking at every opportunity to score," Kompany went on to say. "It means every phase of the game. We have a plan, we have an idea to score a goal. I don't care if it's a throw-in or a corner we're defending: we clear it, then we try to get up the other end and score."

Kompany surprised himself with just how quickly that offensive philosophy took hold. His new team, with several fresh additions, went on to seal promotion with a record seven games remaining, going on to win the title by plundering 87 of those cherished goals en route to a dominant 101-point haul.

It certainly surprised the footballing public, too. Jaws dropped with every free-flowing win. Perhaps unfairly, such style was never expected at Turf Moor – for so long an epicentre of pragmatism, a place that the doyen of pretty football, Pep Guardiola, once compared to a visit to the dentist. Soon after Kompany's arrival, though, Burnley were playing the kind of football that made opposition defences open wide and say 'Ahhhh'. Or more accurately, 'Arrghhhh'.

Kompany had joined from Anderlecht, confident in the clarity of how he wanted successful football teams to play. But he was realistic – after all, he was turning the club 180 degrees. New methods; new ways of thinking; and new players, after wholesale changes to his squad. He signed an initial deal of unspecified length, but presumed success would take two or three years.

But that kind of time is rare in the modern game, and the Belgian's appointment itself – while seeing one of the most celebrated individuals in Premier League history arrive at the club – invited some trepidation. Under Kompany, Anderlecht had shown style but lacked substance and never looked like title candidates in his two full seasons in charge. This would be the Championship, seemingly not the place for callow educators.

"There were pretty mixed feelings when Kompany arrived at the club," admits Dave Thomas, a fan since 1960 and author of many books, the latest about their promotion season entitled *Burnley FC: Champions Again*. "If you looked at the online messageboards, there was some concern – it was felt that he hadn't torn up any trees at Anderlecht and his arrival was a big gamble."

Gambling had hardly been Burnley's style during the 10 years of Sean Dyche's tenure – but under American owner Alan Pace, they were a club quietly aching for something new.

"Dyche had been there for so long, he was part of the furniture," says Dan Black, who covered the promotion campaign for the *Burnley Express*. "He'd stamped his style on the club and was the mastermind behind their new training ground. Suddenly, that was all gone and you wondered where we would go from there.

"But Kompany's appointment came at the perfect time. There wasn't much investment going in, and they needed someone who was completely different to overhaul both the squad and the club itself. It needed to go in a completely different direction – that's what











"EVEN WHEN THINGS DIDN'T GO SMOOTHLY AT FIRST, YOU KNEW THE PLAYERS WERE BUYING IN"

Kompany did. There was excitement due to his playing reputation, but there weren't huge expectations. His success was limited in Belgium – fans were willing to be patient."

While supporters wondered, Kompany got to work – hard work. For all the novelty of this cerebral new man in charge of Burnley, he was never going to arrogantly disregard the club's DNA formed under Dyche. Instead, he harnessed the work ethic that had seen them overachieve for so long.

Training sessions were doubled; they were intense, varied and overseen by Kompany. "I couldn't have asked for more," was his response to victory at Huddersfield in their opening match.

But he did ask for more – much more. While performances were decent and his high-octane, possession-based style evident, a series of frustrating draws quelled spirits.

The team were conceding late goals, most notably to deny them big away wins at West Brom, Cardiff and Birmingham, suggesting that they were yet to be as mentally switched on as Kompany's style required.

"He'd gotten rid of a lot of players and implemented a totally new brand of training and playing," says Black. "Josh Cullen had come from Anderlecht, so he knew what was coming there, but for everyone else it was new, and there were so many new relationships to be formed on the pitch. It was always going to take time but you could see they were buying into it, even when it didn't go smoothly."

One such time came at Bramall Lane in early November. It finished a 5-2 humbling against promotion rivals Sheffield United, but one that Kompany felt might actually aid his team. "Burnley is a humble club, but as we've done well for a sustained period of time, we have to make sure we don't get carried away," he said post-match. "Losses bring that home."

Eight days later, rivals Blackburn visited Turf Moor and were destroyed 3-0. "Vincent Kompany football at its finest," recalls Dave Thomas. Ashley Barnes scored twice. Much had been asked of the veteran – a stalwart of the Dyche era, but under Kompany the forward was reinventing himself, dropping into pockets and creating space while keeping his goalscoring edge. For Barnes, read Burnley. An old dog learning new tricks.

Clockwise from above "Stop right now, thank you very much"; but even Vinny couldn't put his human touch on transforming Anderlecht; half a lifetime from Hamburg days

"VINNY, MEET CARLA"

On the first day of August, back in 2010, Manchester City faced Inter in Baltimore on pre-season. The Nerazzurri were newly crowned champions of Europe – and from kick-off, they showed their might by taking City apart. It was Roberto Mancini's first pre-season as manager and a barometer of the work still to be done.

Kompany – by now playing at centre-back, having started as a holding midfielder upon his arrival in 2008 – wasn't happy. It was only a friendly, but his team's tempo was low and good habits weren't being formed. Then... *bang*. He put in a heavy challenge on Samuel Eto'o. The Cameroon legend was irked. *Crack*. He did it again. "The more you complain, the more I'll do it," Kompany told him. Inter won, 3-0 but a point was made.

"Vinny was one of the most aggressive players that I played with," his former City team-mate Nedum Onuoha tells *FFT*. "He loved to get on the ball, not overplay, but be involved. If it wasn't going well, he never shied away from things. That game against Inter was one of those times. Yes, it was a friendly but we were getting battered.

"Most of the team were just disappointed, but with Vinny it was bigger – there was real frustration and he took matters into his own hands, to get on the front foot and upset their rhythm. Vinny wasn't prepared to be beaten in that matter. It was about personal pride. Gradually that attitude set the tone at the whole club. You don't roll over, ever. Every game matters, never make it easy. Those standards remain at the club today."

Standards. It's an important word for Kompany. During that initial meeting with Burnley's players, the word came up again and again. Those who played with him are not surprised.

"As a player, he joined Manchester City at the age of 22, and he always thought like a manager," says Dietmar Hamann, who was at the club when the Belgian signed from Hamburg. "Vinny held himself and his team-mates to high standards. Even before ▶

he was captain, I remember we had a bad spell at City and he called the players together into a room without the coaching staff. He said to us, 'We've got to be better than this – if anybody has got something to say, get it out now, then we can go onto the pitch and all pull together'. That's what he has always done and why it's no surprise that he's making his mark as a manager."

Highly rated in his younger years, Kompany joined Man City for £6m in 2008 – a relatively modest fee prior to the major investment that followed their Abu Dhabi takeover. He became the team's leader in 2011, taking over from Carlos Tevez at the start of a campaign that saw him captain the club to their first league title since 1968.

Despite the arrival of more big signings, it was Kompany's steady but forceful leadership which defined their continued success. Even when he was injured, his body challenging him time and time again, he'd advise those charged with filling his boots. When he was playing, he'd offer emotional support to those who were out of the side, always on hand with the right words.

"I met Vinny before he came to City," says Onuoha. "He was a massive prospect at Anderlecht, then Hamburg, so I'd heard of him and went to watch him at Hamburg. He played No.10 that day and played well. I spent a few days with him and we became friends – in fact, I liked him so much that I introduced him to a friend of mine back in Manchester called Carla. Not only did he sign for City months later, but he eventually married her and they now have children!

"So I guess I saw something in him immediately, but the funny thing about Vincent is that his significance at the club grew with every season. He was so tough mentally, always overcoming his own injuries and setbacks, but also helping team-mates to be the best they could be.

"He was never bossy, but Vinny knew exactly how he wanted to play the game. Playing with him at centre-back, I always knew how he wanted me to complement him. If he wanted to be aggressive, he needed someone who'd cover for him. He'd step forward and attack the ball, confident that I would cover him. He made it easy.

"Vinny helped create the character of the football club. Others did too, but he wasn't just a good player, he drove those standards; he was the one who organised the fines, demanding respect from everyone. He was always good at relaying messages to people, even if it had to be done in different ways. If someone needed shouting at, he could do that, but if someone needed gentle advice, he could do that too. I do think he was a bit ahead of his time, because he was taking a more individual approach to the group."



Above "Last one to lift the trophy cleans this up later"

"HE DROVE THE STANDARDS OF A FOOTBALL CLUB. I THINK HE WAS A BIT AHEAD OF HIS TIME"

THE ANDERLECHT LEARNING CURVE

For all of those attributes, seemingly putting him on course for a future in management, Kompany admits that it wasn't until he started to work with Pep Guardiola in 2016 that he felt a definite calling towards the profession. Kompany won half of his 10 major trophies with Man City under the Catalan – but as much as the silverware, in Guardiola, Kompany found his ideal textbook.

"I had good examples in my family with my dad and my mum, who were both leaders in their own way," Kompany has said. "The first four months with Pep, though, I was injured – the worst way to introduce yourself to a new manager. During those four months, that's when I knew I was going to be a coach. I had a manager who made so much sense. I watched everything he did and listened to every word he said. I was there taking mental notes on everything. I watched every training session, despite being injured. I was in every meeting, despite not playing in the games. I was drinking in the information."

PEP'S DISCIPLES

Kompany isn't the only manager to have learned from working directly with Pep Guardiola – these four did, too



XAVI

Time with Pep: Four years at Barcelona, as part of arguably the greatest club team of all time.
Managerial career so far: Champion of Qatar with Al Sadd, then champion of Spain in his first full season at Barça.



XABI ALONSO

Time with Pep: Two years as a player at Bayern Munich.
Managerial career: Three years with Real Sociedad B, then an impressive debut campaign with Bayer Leverkusen last term.



MIKEL ARTETA

Time with Pep: Three years as his assistant at Man City.
Managerial career: Nearly four years at Arsenal, winning the FA Cup and almost toppling his old mentor in the Premier League title race.



ENZO MARESCA

Time with Pep: Man City assistant last term, as they won the Treble.
Managerial career: Before working with the Blues' first team, a six-month spell bossing Parma. Now Leicester's new gaffer in his first post-Pep job.





Above When you've got the taste for silver...

Kompany's first steps into management were unorthodox. Having left Manchester in the summer of 2019, he returned to Anderlecht as player-manager. Things didn't go well. The club made their worst start to a season in 21 years – before August was even over, he'd decided to concentrate on playing for one more season, then hang up his boots and return to the manager's job ahead of the 2020-21 campaign.

"It was difficult for Kompany in Belgium," says respected Belgian writer Kristof Terreur. "The club needed rebuilding and there was very little money. He made mistakes, like signing Samir Nasri who clearly wasn't fit enough, and he struggled working with different technical directors."

Anderlecht finished a highly disappointing eighth in 2019-20, their lowest finish since the 1930s, but improved to make the top-four play-offs in Kompany's first full season as boss. In 2021-22, they nudged up another place in the final table but lost the Belgian Cup final to Gent, meaning they'd only qualified for the Europa Conference League for a second successive season.

Despite the club's financial restrictions and Kompany working with the second-youngest squad in Europe, Anderlecht were deemed too big a club to tread water. Kompany had asked supporters to "trust the process", but for many that wasn't enough.

"You have to win the title with Anderlecht, or at least get them into the Europa League," says Terreur. "To some people, the process was going nowhere. They got to a cup final but the club was in turmoil. Kompany was working with very limited means but many fans and onlookers were impatient. He argued that the team was overachieving, though – and if you look at the season they have just had without him..."

In 2022-23, while Kompany's Burnley were getting promoted, Anderlecht finished 11th.

"The great thing about him was that he'd always communicate with the fans," adds Terreur. "Even after defeats, he'd show up in pubs and explain or apologise for games."

After Burnley's win against Blackburn in November, pubs in the Lancashire town were doing a roaring trade – there was no need for apologies. That win was a prelude to a 10-match winning streak and unbeaten run of 22 league games that hurled the Clarets back into the Premier League. Success based on possession, playing from the back, moving teams side to side, scoring goals from all over the pitch. Sound familiar?

Comparisons to Guardiola are inevitable, but at 37, Kompany is still more pup than Pep. While top clubs like Tottenham and Chelsea showed interest this spring – he reportedly took a phone call from the Blues and impressed the ownership there – Kompany was quick to sign a new contract at Burnley. "A good environment," he called it, where he can continue to build and learn.

Players were called back into pre-season in early June, just two days after the FA Cup final. Being pulled from a sunbed so soon might usually cause contention, but this is a squad that has fully bought into the manager's methods. "We talked to the players often last season," says journalist Dan Black. "Johann Berg Gudmundsson, Jack Cork, players in their 30s; then you speak to the younger heads too, who were just seeing what it was all about, playing the Vincent Kompany way. Speaking to all of the different demographics, what came across is how much they all enjoy it, learning at different stages of their careers. That gives you confidence that Kompany is building something quite special."

The team certainly looks special. The boss publicly backs his youngsters, tipping them for big-league excellence – but what about Kompany himself? The signs are great. Already he looks like a man able to educate youth while galvanising experience. But how far can he go?

"He looks like he's going to the top," says Onuoha. "The style of play is one thing, but what Vinny advocates is the collective. He won't be interested in individuals, he knows a club can't be a deck of cards – it has to be about solid foundations and he'll make sure everyone is involved. Sorry to compare, but that's how Pep has gone about his business at City, and Vinny will be the same.

"He's also very adaptable and can change things to suit his players. This season will be a test. They'll try to play the same style of football, but will it gain the same results? If it doesn't, doubts may creep in among the players, and what he chooses to do at that point might dictate just how good he is.

"The thing he has is time. He's only in his 30s. Roy Hodgson is still managing in the Premier League and is more than twice his age. Vinny has all his life to live as a coach, but people want to fast-forward careers. He won't be rushed."

Kompany, after all, has the self-confidence to back himself. The way he wants his teams to play is clear – whatever challenges the Premier League offers, he has said that he's prepared. It looks like the footballing world might need to prepare itself, too. Vincent Kompany has more surprises up his sleeve.

CRISTIANO OF ARA

After an acrimonious Manchester United exit, Cristiano Ronaldo has hit the Middle East goal trail, bringing the Saudi Pro League ever greater exposure. He's desperate for yet another league title, yes, but also to start a football revolution...

***Words** Mark Lomas*



More than 27,000 people were on their feet in Mecca, shouting "Siuuu!" at the top of their voices, as Cristiano Ronaldo celebrated his fourth goal of the game in trademark fashion. Al-Nassr were 4-0 up at relegation battlers Al-Wehda, but the home side's fans didn't seem all that bothered that they were on the receiving end of a tonking. CR7 was the unquestionable star.

In their previous home match at the King Abdulaziz Sports City Stadium a fortnight earlier, Al-Wehda had lost 2-0 to Al-Fateh in front of a crowd of only 2,455. The holy city welcomes around a million visitors each year for Islam's famous Hajj pilgrimage, but this time people had come to worship Ronaldo.

In bagging the 61st hat-trick of his career to put Al-Nassr in total control – plundering his 500th league goal along the way – the 38-year-old showed surprising pace to charge clear, fire home a rebound, seal a 4-0 victory, then depart with the matchball. Even in the twilight of his career, Ronaldo remains box office wherever he goes.

HRISTO AND HIGUITA

Saudi Arabia has been known to spring the odd footballing surprise over the years. At the country's first-ever World Cup finals in 1994, Saeed Al-Owairan slalomed through Belgium's defence to score an iconic goal and secure a shock passage to the second round. Twenty-eight years later in Qatar, the Green Falcons stunned the globe as Salem Al-Dawsari's superb curling effort sealed a comeback victory over Lionel Messi and eventual champions Argentina in one of the group stage's most memorable moments.

Yet the December 30, 2022 announcement that Ronaldo had signed for Al-Nassr topped the lot. Supporters were pinching themselves as Saudi marketing executives rubbed their hands together in glee – so, in truth, did Erik ten Hag following CR7's Manchester United defenestration. One of the greatest players of all time was coming to join the Saudi Pro League. The billboards of the capital Riyadh, where Al-Nassr are based, were quickly filled with images of the Portuguese No.7 in the yellow and blue of his new club.

In Europe, critics quickly pounced on Saudi Arabia for sportswashing, and on Ronaldo for chasing the riyals - he'll reportedly earn 800 million a season (around £175m) over the course of his two-and-a-half-year deal, making him the highest paid footballer in history. In West Asia, however, no one was listening, the external noise drowned out by the deafening sound of celebrations on the streets of the kingdom.

In Ronaldo's former stamping ground of Madrid, Saudi journalist Khaled Al-Arafah also felt in celebratory mood. A pitchside reporter for Saudi TV channel SSC, Al-Arafah was working in the Spanish capital and had seen the story develop from distant rumour to growing possibility. Still, though, he felt









there were too many obstacles for Al-Nassr to get the deal over the line.

"I had some doubts, because after the World Cup, every sports journalist wondered where he'd go," he explains to *FFT*, having since returned to Riyadh.

"I knew the Saudi Pro League's strategy is to become one of the top 10 leagues in the world and to do that, of course, you need players. I really hoped he'd come – when it was confirmed, I was happy at the thought of interviewing him after matches, and just tweeted something like, 'Thank God'. That tweet had around 1.2 million views in three hours, which tells you what Ronaldo is."

Outside of Asia, interest in the Saudi Pro League has never been particularly high, but 'The Ronaldo Effect' was instantaneous. New international channels began broadcasting the league at a stroke and the division now claims to have coverage in more than 120 countries worldwide.



"IT'S LIKE APPLE HAVE MOVED THEIR HQ TO SAUDI ARABIA – HE'S MORE THAN A PLAYER"

"That alone is a tangible impact," continues Al-Arafah. "Most of the channels have taken two matches per week; Al-Nassr's game, plus the strongest match of the round. People can see the stadiums, the atmosphere – it's very positive for Saudi football."

Ronaldo's move also catapulted Al-Nassr into world football's collective consciousness from a position of relative obscurity outside the Middle East. The club had reached the AFC Champions League semi-finals in both 2020 and 2021, and could boast such former



managers as Fabio Cannavaro, Mario Zagallo and, er, Rene Higuita (plus Billy Bingham in the late 1980s, combining the role with his job as Northern Ireland coach). Ex-players included Hristo Stoichkov and Denilson, but the Knights of Najd have won the league once since 2015, often playing second fiddle to Riyadh rivals Al-Hilal, historically Saudi Arabia's most successful outfit.

"Al-Nassr have gone from having around 800,000 followers on Instagram to more than 14 million, which just shows Ronaldo's value from a marketing perspective," says Al-Arafah. "A friend sent me a photo from Brazil of a kid in an Al-Nassr kit. That would never have happened before."

For supporters of Al-Nassr (the club's name means 'victory' in Arabic), it's taken a bit of getting used to. Abdulmajeed Al-Arrak is a lifelong Nassrawi and recently had his own surprise international encounter with the increasingly familiar yellow-and-blue jersey,

Clockwise from above "Yeah, I'm great"; No.7 shirts are flying off the shelves; billboard big shot; Ronnie is lighting up the game in Saudi Arabia; "Oi, no gawping at my purple socks..."

at Milan's famed cathedral. "Seeing someone wearing an Al-Nassr shirt in Milan absolutely blew my mind," says Al-Arrak.

"In an historic city, a football city, at that historic place. This is what Cristiano Ronaldo does. It's like having Apple or General Motors moving their headquarters to Saudi Arabia – you don't have an individual, you have this global brand and everything that comes with it. He's more than a player."

Forced to wait for his Al-Nassr bow because of a two-match ban – incurred in England for angrily knocking a phone from a teenager's hand after a Manchester United defeat at Everton – his first outing in Saudi Arabia came in an exhibition match, watched by 68,000 people in mid-January. The opponents? Paris Saint-Germain and Lionel Messi, obviously. The Portuguese lined up for a combined XI featuring Al-Nassr and Al-Hilal players. The Argentine scored once, Ronaldo scored twice, but PSG prevailed 5-4.

CR7's competitive Al-Nassr debut, a 1-0 league win at home to Al-Ettifaq, kept them top of the table. The club's 25,000-capacity KSU Stadium was packed – in the first half of the 2022-23 campaign, their attendances had averaged around 16,000.

Though Saudi crowds are usually strong for the big games, especially the 'Clasicos' between teams from Riyadh and Jeddah, interest tends to dwindle for less important fixtures. Yet Al-Nassr's home matches have remained close to capacity since Ronaldo's arrival, and his presence at away games has boosted gates, too. In February, mid-table Damac welcomed 13,434 for their match against Cristiano & Co, up from 3,646 in their previous home clash.

"There are definitely more tourists going to Nassr matches, and I even have friends from Al-Hilal who go to the game purely to watch Ronaldo live," reveals Al-Arrak. "You also see more people with only a passing interest in ▸



football – YouTubers, TikTok stars – because Ronaldo is someone who goes beyond sport."

"I WAS WRONG ABOUT HIM"

Ronaldo marked that match at Damac with another treble in a 3-0 win. Two weeks after his four goals at Al-Wehda, he became the first player to notch two Saudi Pro League hat-tricks this term, despite arriving halfway through the campaign. His razor-sharp finishing has remained – with eight goals in February, Al-Nassr's new captain collected the league's Player of the Month award.

Scoring on the pitch, the Portuguese was also enjoying substantially more privacy off the field than he's ever likely to get in Europe, even if there's little that can be done about the hordes of admirers who flock to Riyadh's restaurants when they hear Ronaldo is dining out. He's the new darling of Saudi Arabia, and while he's still a target for comedians and television shows in the kingdom, he's being absorbed seamlessly into a new media and entertainment landscape. Many watched his Piers Morgan interview in Saudi Arabia, but no local talk show hosts had managed to land their own scoop at the time of writing, with Al-Nassr unsurprisingly keeping access to their talisman very tight.

By early April, he'd amassed 11 goals in his first nine Saudi Pro League matches, playing the full 90 minutes in each of them. It put him five behind the division's joint top scorers for the whole season, his team-mate Talisca and Al-Hilal's Odion Ighalo.

Overseas stars have been coming to Saudi Arabia for several years. Al-Nassr's squad also includes ex-Arsenal goalkeeper David Ospina and former Bayern Munich defender Luiz Gustavo, with Grzegorz Krychowiak, Ever Banega and Cristian Tello (formerly of Sevilla, Valencia and Barcelona respectively) plying their trade at rival teams. Even pre-Ronaldo, the league had been improving.

While the frontman's off-pitch value was never in doubt upon his arrival, not everyone



was certain he'd make the same impact on it. If being dropped by high-pressing disciple Ten Hag at Old Trafford seemed inevitable, his benching for Portugal at the World Cup – and an inability to understand why – made Ronaldo resemble a footballing King Canute unable to hold back his ageing.

He arrived at the KSU Stadium at a tough time for Al-Nassr and manager Rudi Garcia, whose side had been ravaged by a series of injuries to important players. In Ronaldo's second appearance for the club, they lost the Saudi Super Cup to Al-Ittihad, managed by Nuno Espirito Santo and captained by former West Brom defender Ahmed Hegazi.

But Ronaldo's first nine league matches delivered 22 points out of 27. His goals and attitude were credited with lifting the spirits of the depleted squad, particularly the less experienced Saudi players who were asked to step into the starting XI. Another defeat to Al-Ittihad, this time in the league, meant Al-Nassr's opponents leapfrogged them at the summit to lead the league by a point in early April, but many feel the club would have been out of contention for the title by then without Ronaldo.

"There's no question in my mind that he's raised the bar," says Al-Arrak. "I've watched Al-Nassr for a long time, I've seen managers and players come and go; too often it looked like players were just here to pick up a cheque and, honestly, I feared that could be exactly the same with Ronaldo."

Ronaldo's cheque may be unfathomably large, but his desire to win has matched it.





Clockwise from far right "They told me it's not lavender"; goals have flowed for CR7; supporters are packing out Al-Nassr games; "Follow me, or I'll make you go to dinner with Piers Morgan..."

"What I thought about Cristiano was a big mistake," confesses Al-Arrak. "He's shown commitment, even from his first friendly. He's still eager to win every game, eager to break records. You can see the emotion on his face. He wants to give everything and rewrite history here."

SSC reporter Al-Arafah is adamant that Ronaldo has given Al-Nassr more belief. He insists it's not just Ronaldo's team-mates who have shown improvement.

"When the Al-Nassr players see Cristiano training, they try to match his massive levels of dedication," says the journalist. "It's about confidence. Watch them before and now, you can see how much they've improved and are genuinely giving their all.

"The same goes for opponents, too. I spoke to Luiz Gustavo recently and he told me that since Ronaldo's arrival, most of the teams

are giving 200 per cent when they take on Al-Nassr. That makes sense. When you play a game and you know people are watching you around the world, you give everything. It makes Saudi Pro League matches better."

The idea that Ronaldo is single-handedly raising the standard of both team-mates and opponents may feel a little far-fetched, but the players at other clubs state they're noticing the difference.

Kaku is a Paraguay international playing for Al-Taawoun – the side who have been heading up the 'best of the rest' behind the top four of Al-Ittihad, Al-Nassr, Al-Hilal and Al-Shabab. The former New York Red Bulls midfielder lined up against Ronaldo during a narrow 2-1 loss in February, and admitted the profile of the match felt bigger because of the No.7's presence.

"Cristiano has changed everything, both at fan level and at a competitive level, too," Kaku tells *FFT*. "He's made the league more watched around the world. He's one of the best in history and facing him was incredible.

"I spoke to him a bit after the match and he seemed to be really enjoying himself in Saudi Arabia. But he also knows the league is extremely difficult."

While on international duty with Portugal in March – a week in which he netted four goals in two stat-padding matches against Luxembourg and Liechtenstein, and posted a new record as the most capped men's player in history – Ronaldo made the bold claim that in "five, six or seven years from now, Saudi Arabia will be the fourth or fifth most competitive league in the world if they continue with this same plan".

As the face of the league, it was difficult to work out whether he was making a genuine prediction or just delivering empty platitudes. However, there's certainly a belief within Saudi Arabia that Ronaldo is simply the start of a football revolution.

A GULF TO BRIDGE

While the Middle East nation is already feeling the benefit of a Ronaldo-induced publicity boom, his move to Al-Nassr also reverberated around the rest of the Gulf, on a high after the World Cup in Qatar.

Chris McHardy, a radio presenter for Dubai Eye 103.8 and commentator for the United Arab Emirates Pro League, interviewed CR7 as part of Dubai's Expo 2020 celebrations – delayed until last year because of COVID-19 – and has seen the Portuguese superstar spend plenty of time there in recent years. In Dubai, Ronaldo has often been the guest of Crown Prince Sheikh Hamdan, training at his exclusive Nad Al Sheba sports complex and staying in privacy at the nearby luxury Bulgari Dubai Resort.

McHardy has resided in the UAE for more than a decade and recognises why the Gulf has always appealed to Ronaldo, but reveals he was still surprised to see one of football's most feted individuals move to Saudi Arabia.

"Cristiano and his family have always loved this part of the world – there's so much love for him here," says McHardy. "He's treated like royalty and afforded more anonymity than he'd get anywhere else. I never got the impression he'd seriously move here to play, but the reverence and respect people have for him offers a great deal of what Cristiano Ronaldo's personality desires."



"IT WILL TAKE MORE THAN RONNIE TO CHALLENGE THE CHAMPIONS LEAGUE HERE"

SAUDI PRO LEAGUE CHAMPIONS

Year	Champion
2015	AL-NASSR
2016	AL-AHLI
2017	AL-HILAL
2018	AL-HILAL
2019	AL-NASSR
2020	AL-HILAL
2021	AL-HILAL
2022	AL-HILAL

In the UAE, though, there's no danger of the Saudi Pro League usurping the Premier League for popularity any time soon.

"It was a big deal for a couple of weeks, but interest has largely fizzled out now," adds McHardy. "The heavyweight European clubs retain a stranglehold on fans' attention here. If the Champions League is on, that will still dominate – it'll take a lot more than Cristiano Ronaldo to change that."

Back in Riyadh, the Saudi Pro League season is gearing up for a fascinating climax, with the final fixtures scheduled for the end of May. Once again, it's been transfer rumours that have caused social media feeds to spin out of control. Luka Modric and Karim Benzema were recently linked with lucrative moves to the country, while Al-Nassr were said to be trying to lure Barcelona's Sergio Busquets to join Ronaldo at the club. Al-Hilal have even reportedly made attempts to bring Messi to the Middle East.

"Messi would be the dream," says sports journalist Al-Arafah with a smile. "It was an amazing moment to have both players on the pitch in Saudi Arabia in January – hopefully one day they'll face each other officially in our domestic league.

"But even if it's not Messi, I'm 99 per cent sure you'll see more outstanding stars in the Saudi Pro League at the start of next season."

For Al-Taawoun's Kaku, the possibility of more high-profile players joining Ronaldo is an exciting prospect, one he believes will have the twin benefit of improving standards ever more and creating a more visible shop window for the talent already competing in the Saudi League.

"We heard the talk about Modric, Benzema and Messi," he says. "The league is growing by leaps and bounds, and that makes it more attractive. Bringing in big-name players is an important detail that will only improve things, and I feel it can push me on to become one of the best in the league, too. It's my desire to reach Europe – now, by playing well here, I think I can have my chance."

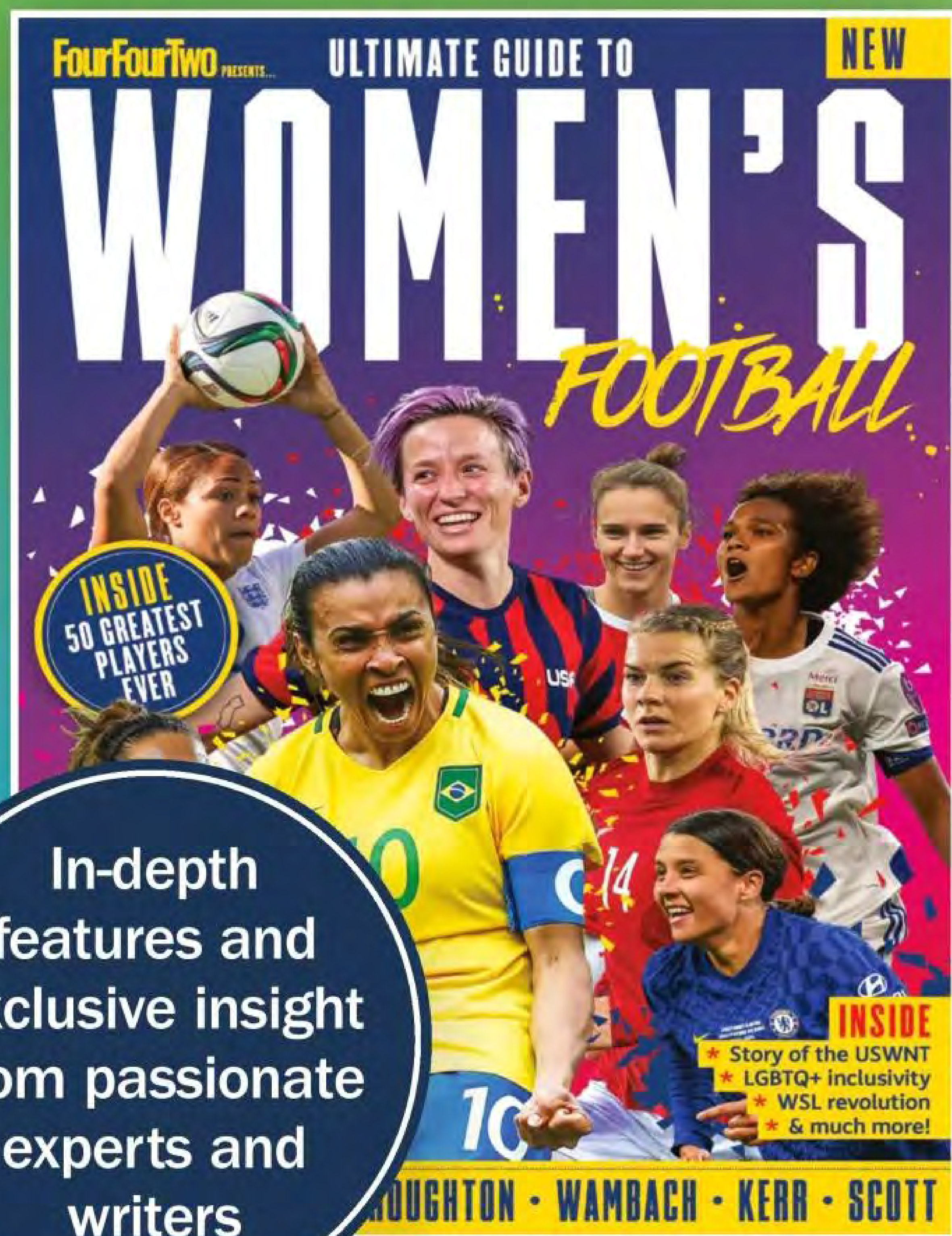
For 18 months, Newcastle United's takeover by the Saudi Public Investment Fund kept the kingdom in the football headlines, although it seems like it was just a first step towards deeper influence within the game. Al-Arafah hopes that Ronaldo's presence and Saudi Arabia's continuing investment in football will help make people more open to visiting the country to experience live sport.

"We'd really love to have football fans from all over the world come and watch matches here," he says. "Everyone is welcome and it would be fantastic for people to experience a Saudi Clasico. We hope that Ronaldo is the beginning. It's only been a few months so far, but it's been superb and we expect even more to come."

In the short term, the quest for silverware is at the forefront of Al-Nassr fans' minds.

"Nassrawis are used to having long periods of no trophies, and the fans will still be here for the team when Ronaldo eventually moves on," says Al-Arrak. He pauses. "But we'd love for him to have success here."

Already a league winner in England, Spain and Italy, Ronaldo is chasing Saudi Arabian title glory before his career comes to an end. Maybe it wasn't exactly what he had in mind even six months ago, but whenever a trophy is there to be won, you can be sure Cristiano Ronaldo won't give it up without a fight.

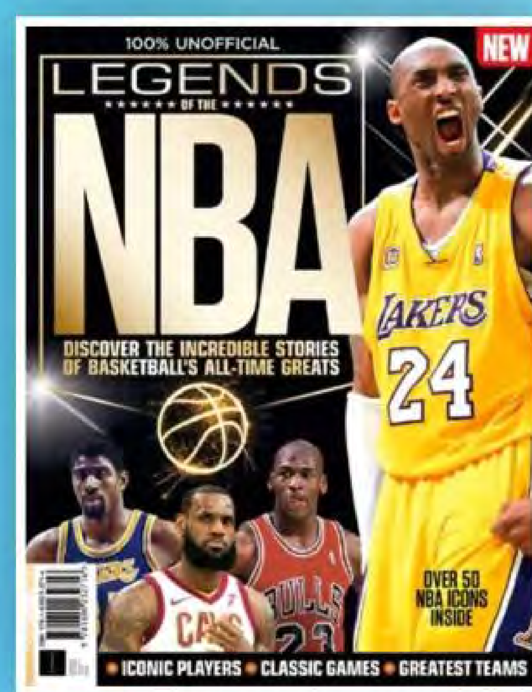


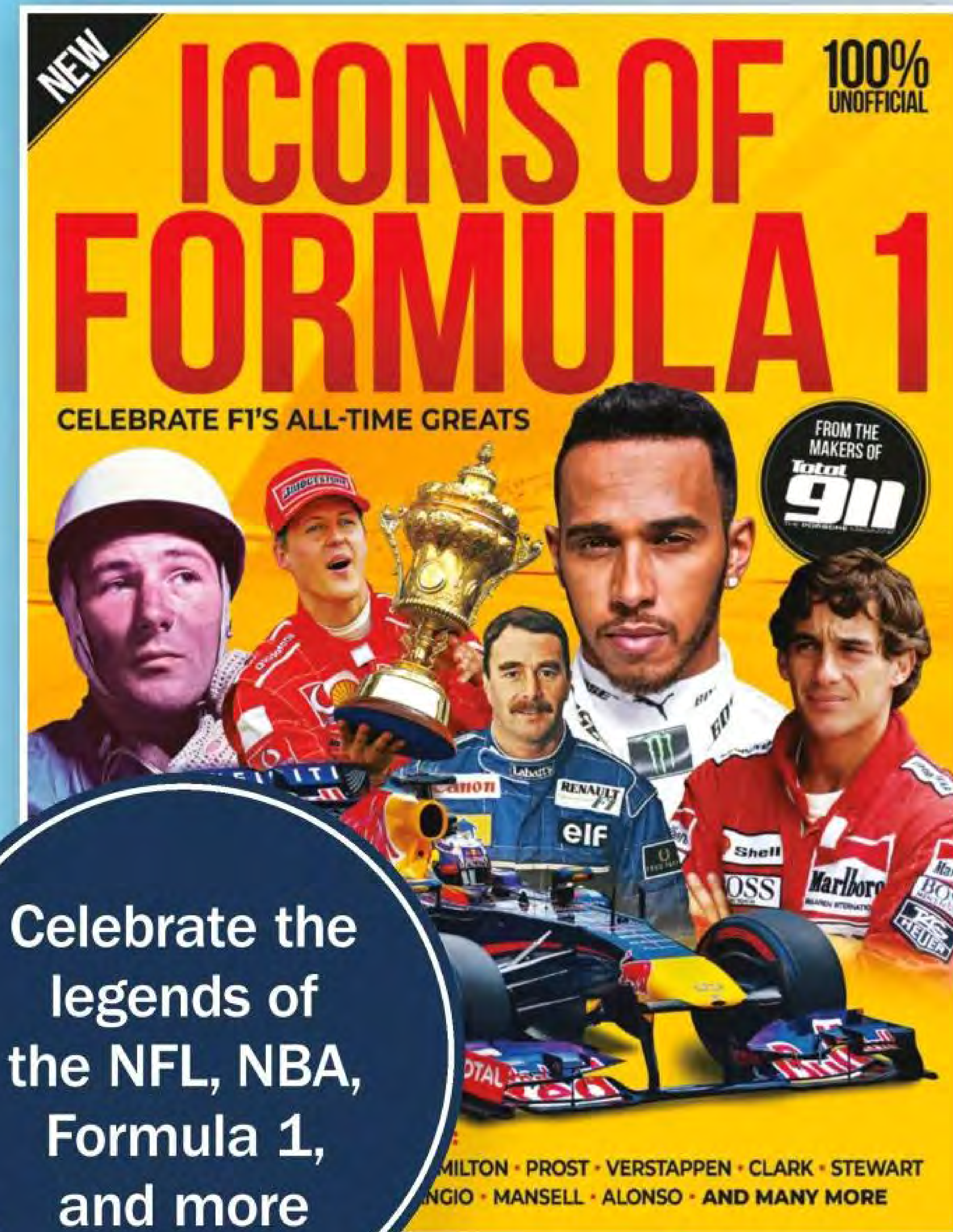
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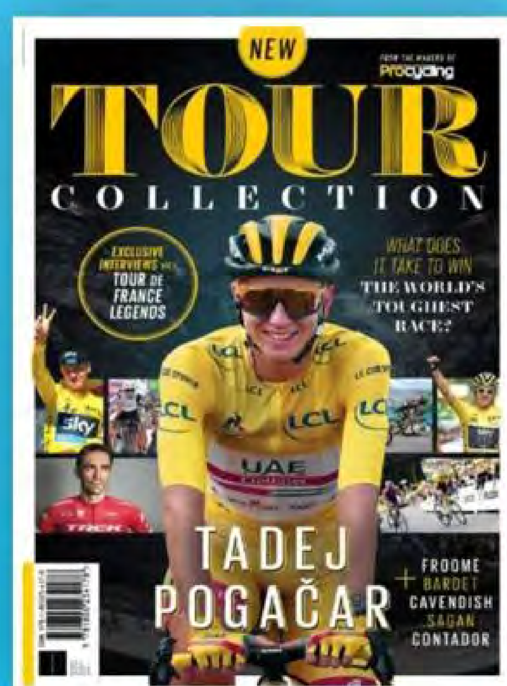






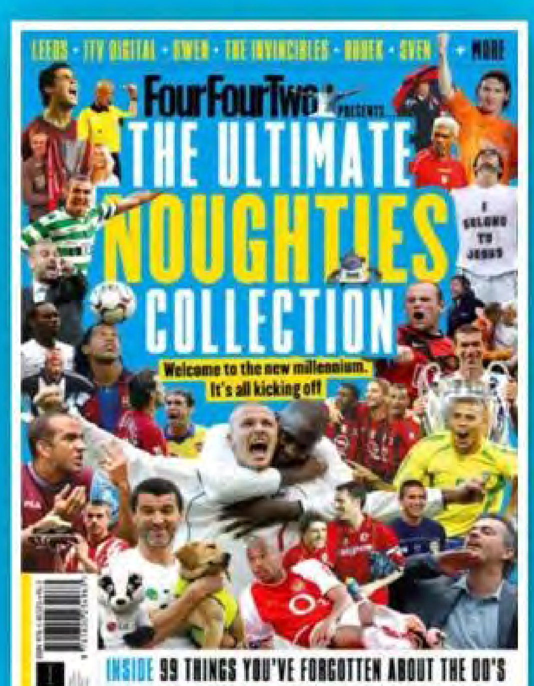








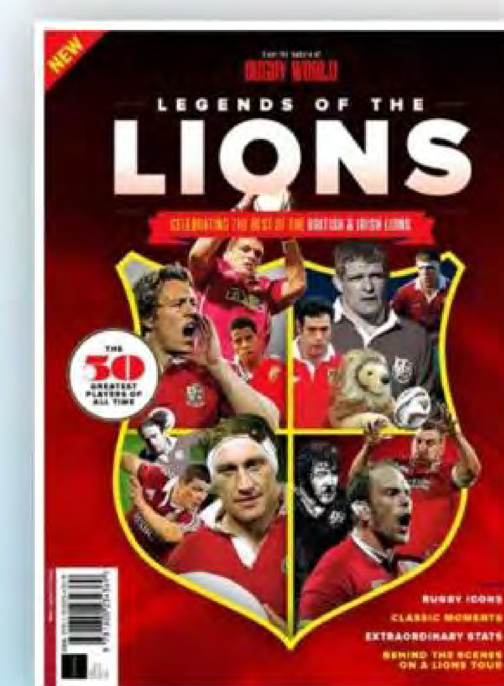
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